

## DESIGNING FINAL TASKS AND ACQUIRING THE COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE WITH THE TASK-ORIENTED APPROACH IN THE BUSINESS ENGLISH CLASSROOM

Anka Veselinova

MIT University, Skopje, Republic of Macedonia

Phone: +389 78 480 926, E-Mail: anka.veselinova@mit.edu.mk

**Abstract.** *In recent times, task-oriented teaching has been revealing an inspiring area of researching wisely conceptualized methodology that encourages all students' participation in class to communicate and interact, using the target language over a previously developed set of tasks, oriented around a major communicative goal. How can teachers determine communicative objectives and later structure them in a framework of consecutive activities for developing a lesson plan, based on a final communicative task? This paper highlights the challenges that task-oriented teaching faces in order to identify students' real world language needs and to choose appropriate real world tasks for acquiring the language communicative competence in class. In addition, task-based instruction contributes immensely in achieving confidence for speaking and fluency on the target language, which is an essential aim for both learners and teachers.*

**Key words:** *task-oriented approach; language communicative competence*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The Chinese philosopher Confucius<sup>1</sup> said a wise thought: “I hear and I forget; I see and I remember; I do and I understand.” It foresees the contemporary ways of teaching in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In the language context, this means that students need to ‘do’ the language actively, not only to perceive it with their ears and eyes, but also to practice it by speaking it. Teachers should create an appropriate setting with all the necessary pre-conditions where the language will be spoken and students’ language needs will be met. In addition, they should teach students how to interact in the target language because interaction is the primary language activity. Their main mission is to ensure the development of students’ communicative competence by implementing proper means that will allow them to feel more comfortable to use the target language in real situations.

Task-oriented approach liberates students from the chains of traditional methodology. Thus, learning the language form is not a priority at all; on the contrary, utilizing the language for communicating a message is encouragingly crucial. In other words, this approach ‘emphasizes dialogue between learners and teachers and between the learners

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<sup>1</sup> Chinese philosopher (551 BC – 479 BC)

themselves'<sup>2</sup> with the main purpose 'to stimulate new ideas, opinions, and perceptions rather than simply to exchange them,'<sup>3</sup> which means that content-oriented meaningful activities should prevail the plot of each class rather than spend most of the time in practicing linguistic forms.

## 2. STAGES IN THE LESSON

When the task-oriented approach is applied in the language classroom, the lesson is organized around a central task, following a sequence of certain stages that ensure a steady progression and development of the communicative competence and assure a completion of the final task.

**Stage 1 or pre-task:** The topic is introduced, supported with a picture, poster, clip or other media, and a brief discussion is opened. Students are announced what they will be expected to do in the final task.

**Stage 2 or task:** Students work in pairs or small groups to complete several language activities, related to the major task that will follow later. The teacher might monitor and observe or assist students if it is necessary. Still, should we remind that the language form is not a priority, and all activities in this stage should only provide language support for the later stages, when the scenario will be conceptualized by each group, so learners would build more confidence for performing the final task.

**Stage 3 or planning the final task:** Students plan and prepare a short presentation of their work depending on the assignment requirements. This might be a dialogue, a presentation, a speech, a letter, an email, an essay, etc. While they practice how to do the presentation, the teacher is constantly available for surpassing any language problems they might face during this stage.

**Stage 4 or presentation or performing the final task:** Students give their presentation in front of the class and the teacher briefly gives general comments on the content, the style and the usage of language.

**Stage 5 or analysis:** The teacher highlights relevant parts from students' work. He/she may ask students to notice interesting features within their work. The teacher can also draw attention to analyse the particular language that students have used during the presentation.

**Stage 6 or practice:** At the end of the lesson, the teacher selects language areas to practise, based upon students' needs that emerged in the stages of planning and performing the final task. After that, students practice activities to increase their confidence and make a note of useful language.

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<sup>2</sup> Beglar and Hunt, "Implementing task-based language teaching", *Methodology in language teaching: An anthology of current practice*. (2002). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p.96

<sup>3</sup> Beglar and Hunt, (2002). p.96

### 3. IDENTIFYING STUDENTS' LANGUAGE NEEDS

The teacher needs to be a diagnostician in order to identify students' language needs. Besides having in mind their level of language proficiency, their age, and their profile, the first and the most important thing the teacher should do is to recognize the reason why a student is learning a foreign language. The purpose may be diverse: for study and research, for work, for travelling, for family and friends, for emigrating, etc. Once teachers have diagnosed the reason why students are interested in learning the chosen foreign language, they can set up potential goals to be achieved with students, which will be a firm ground for determining a final task for a language lesson.

Secondly, teachers are to identify students' language strengths and weaknesses, what should be considered as an asset, and to what extent something can be difficult enough to be set as a challenge.

Thirdly, teachers should take into consideration all background information that can be found out on students' language needs before they decide what the final task will be, by determining it in a real context.

### 4. DETERMINING THE RESEARCH FRAME

The purpose of this paper is to show how the task-based approach and some newly designed final tasks affect the development of the communicative competence of the focus group. Thus, this practical research is based upon an empirical study of gathering data over experimentally designed final tasks, closely observing the focus group during their classes, and conducting a survey when the semester finishes. The qualitative and quantitative methods are here applied in order to study how students accept the idea for learning the language with this approach and to measure the survey results on the teacher's expectations on the impact of this experiment. The major hypothesis set in this study is: *The newly designed final tasks will have a positive impact on the acquisition of students' communicative competence.*

#### 4.1. Outcomes of the research

##### 4.1.1. The experiment

Working for six academic years with students whose major is Management, has allowed me to realize all strengths and weaknesses that specialized Business English student's books have. Adapting the lesson for students' needs means offering them a better approach to the matters they will really need in order to acquire the language communicative competence for their future job. This is why I decided to pilot 12 newly designed final tasks, one for each teaching week and focus on the development of their language communicative competence.

##### 4.1.1.1. Defining the objective and the final task for a business English class

For this paper, a sequence of final tasks is designed, which arouses from the syllabus planning of Business English for first year students at MIT Faculty of Management, Skopje, who learn English as a foreign language for their management studies and their future work purposes. Their proficiency level is between A2 and C1 according to the Common European Framework of References for languages and their age is 18+. They

have four 45-minutes Business English classes in a row per week, so each week session lasts for 3 hours in total. Each semester lasts for 16 weeks, divided in several segments. See table 1.

Table 1 Timetable of classes

Week N <sup>o</sup>	Main activities
Week 1	Teaching
Week 2	Teaching
Week 3	Teaching
Week 4	Teaching
Week 5	Teaching
Week 6	Teaching
Week 7	Preparatory week
Week 8	Partial exams
Week 9	Teaching
Week 10	Teaching
Week 11	Teaching
Week 12	Teaching
Week 13	Teaching
Week 14	Teaching
Week 15	Partial exams
Week 16	Final exams

Firstly, 12 newly designed final tasks will be enlisted for weeks 1-6 and 9-14, and secondly, the impact on the acquisition of the communicative competence of our focus group will be analysed. Once the objective of the lesson is defined, the final task can be easily designed, contextualized, and shaped.

***A list of final tasks, accompanied with their objectives:***

*Week 1:*

**Objective:** At the end of this lesson, students will be able *to handle interview questions*.

**Task:** Half of the group are job seekers, and apply for a job, by sending a CV, and a cover letter. The others work in the Human Resources Department of Company X, which has advertised a vacancy for a customer services manager dealing with angry customers. Prepare a set of questions for the shortlisted candidates who had already sent their CVs and cover letters. After checking whether the information about their qualifications and their experience is true and making sure that there is not a CV fraud, do not forget to ask them about particular skills that they gained in their previous job positions, and possible techniques that they may apply to calm down angry customers. At the end, choose the best candidate.

*Week 2:*

**Objective:** At the end of this lesson, students will be able *to take and leave a message in a formal telephone conversation*.

**Task:** Call Company X and introduce yourself and the company you are calling from! Your purpose of calling is a faxed order you received yesterday, but the fax does not seem to be clear enough. Ask to speak to Person X! Unfortunately, he/she is not currently in their office. Ask the secretary if you could leave a message and thank politely.

*Week 3:*

**Objective:** At the end of this lesson, students will be able *to place and process an order*.

**Task:** Call the supplier and make an enquiry about the products you want to order and their price. Place the order and wait for the supplier to process it and check if the products are in stock. Once the order is confirmed, ask for a date for delivery of the goods and thank the agent.

*Week 4:*

**Objective:** At the end of this lesson, students will be able *to respond to customer complaints*.

**Task:** You are a customer services agent, and you receive a complaint by an unsatisfied customer whose delivery is a week late. Listen actively, empathize with the customer, and thank him/her for informing you about the problem. Be assertive and let him/her know what you will do to solve the issue.

*Week 5:*

**Objective:** At the end of this lesson, students will be able *to welcome visitors in their company*.

**Task:** A collaborator is visiting your company for the first time. Have a small talk by asking him/her about the flight and the hotel room. Introduce yourself, your position in the company, and your responsibilities. Show him the company, and briefly describe what your colleagues do in each department. Politely answer his/her questions and clarify in more detail.

*Week 6:*

**Objective:** At the end of this lesson, students will be able *to run a meeting*.

**Task:** You want to meet your employees. Call your secretary and define the purpose of the meeting, the time, the venue and the agenda, so he/she can write the invitation to the participants. At the meeting, open the session by welcoming everyone and thanking them for their attendance. Remind them about the agenda and decide who will record and take the minutes of the meeting. Give the floor to the attendees, so they can express themselves about the issues on the agenda. Respect everyone's time, stay on the topic, and move forward from one point to the next. Close the meeting with an action plan. The minutes taker writes the minutes and emails it to all attendees.

*Week 7:*

**Objective:** At the end of this lesson, students will be able *to make a formal presentation*.

**Task:** (Students previously choose a topic and do a research about it.) Make a concept and elicit the main goals of the research by writing only the keywords of your ideas on each slide of the power point presentation. Insert charts, graphs, pictures, so the presentation would be more attractive. Give your presentation in front of the class. Do not forget to make eye-contact with the audience all the time! Ask them interactive questions, so they could feel as a part of the presentation! Use the right language to emphasise the keywords and to move from point to point. Make an interesting conclusion.

*Week 8:*

**Objective:** At the end of this lesson, students will be able *to write a memo to their staff*.

**Task:** You are the manager of a company. Recently you have noticed that some employees do not follow the rules, stated in the company policy. Write a memo for the

staff notice board, reminding all employees about working hours, working space, forms of address, security issues, smoking policy, dress code, use of telephones and the Internet, parking, gifts, sick leave, etc.

*Week 9:*

**Objective:** At the end of this lesson, students will be able *to produce a promotional material for a new product or service.*

**Task:** Work in small groups. Think how you could present a product or a service. Do a brainstorming within your group and choose which product or service you are going to promote. Think of adjectives and adverbs that will support your ideas. Decide what slogans, pictures, and headings you will use to make an attractive and catchy promotional material. Describe the strengths of the product/service and the benefits that customers will have. Create several testimonials from customers who have already enjoyed the product/service. Make a plan where you would like to release the promotional material and explain why you have made such choice.

*Week 10*

**Objective:** At the end of this lesson, students will be able *to make an appointment with a business partner/collaborator/potential client.*

**Task:** You want to meet a business partner/collaborator/potential client in order to discuss mutual issues over a product/service your company sells/provides.

- a. Call him/her or his/her secretary and arrange a convenient time in your busy agenda, and a suitable place: your office, meeting room, restaurant, etc.
- b. Email him/her in order to politely postpone or cancel the scheduled meeting due to unforeseen circumstances. Apologise for any inconvenience you may have caused.

*Week 11*

**Objective:** At the end of this lesson, students will be able *to ask for a corporate sponsorship.*

**Task:** You own a small business, and you want to raise funds in order to organise an event in your area. You have already scheduled a meeting with a potential sponsor. Provide him/her with a short description of the event, the purpose of organising it and the targeted audience and elicit the benefits that the sponsor can have out of assisting the revenue for the event.

*Week 12*

**Objective:** At the end of this lesson, students will be able *to persuade an investor to invest in their business start up.*

**Task:** You want to start up a business. You have already produced a viable business plan and identified a list of dozen angel investors.

- a. Write a formal letter/ business investment opportunity to several venture capital organisations where you provide a brief description of your business plan by emphasising the feasibility of your product/service/project.
- b. You have succeeded to attract a potential investor and you have scheduled to hold a first meeting negotiating. Convince the organisation to invest in your business, by reminding them that you have already conducted a market research, you have evaluated the competition, you have estimated how much you will invest, how much more you need from the investor, how much the investor is ready to offer, and how much the investor wants in return.

#### 4.1.2. Observation

Observing them closely, how they accept, or refuse the idea of learning the language over a major speaking or writing task, provided me with fruitful feedback of each participant. All of them have previously worked with General English topics, mostly following a course book, word by word, with their high school teachers and peers. This was the first time they were offered another language context, and an entirely different approach. Some of them showed great interest, and enthusiastically welcomed the idea to take part actively in all lessons. Nevertheless, there were also some, who quietly disagreed with this approach because they didn't feel the necessity of being in the center of the attention, and the need for practicing speaking aloud, in front of the whole group. The latter were usually shy and lacked self-confidence to step up and speak up because of their introvert character, or due to their lower level of language acquisition. They felt more comfortable in stages 1, 2, 3, 5, and 6, when they were in their safe zone where they actively listened, and quietly did the helping exercises. However, in stage 4 where they were required to speak aloud, some of them tried timidly, but others refused politely to perform the final task.

#### 4.1.3. Survey

When the semester finished, students were asked to complete a survey, which consisted of six questions:

1. Assess your proficiency level according to the self-assessment grids of the European Framework for Languages!
2. Have you taken a Business English course before?
3. Has a communicative task previously been a priority in your English classes?
4. Do you think your ability to communicate in English has improved?
5. Were the final tasks from this semester relevant to your studies and your future job?
6. Do you feel more self-confident to use the language actively in your professional context?

The graphs showing the collected data are enlisted below each question analysis.

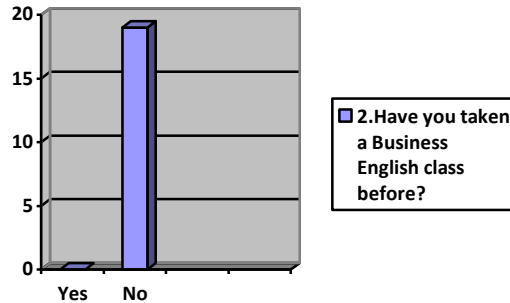
Their answers enabled me to assess how much this approach developed their communicative competence, and whether these newly tailored final tasks, were suitable for them.

Most students evaluated them as independent users between B1 and B2 according to the European Framework for languages. However, there were some with lower level of language knowledge, and some more proficient ones. See pie 1.



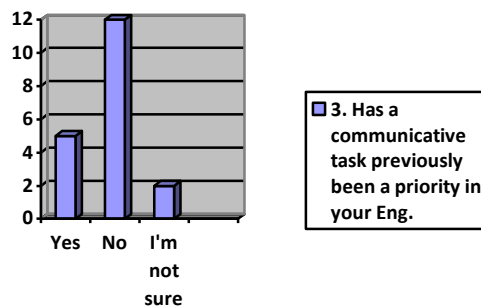
Pie chart 1 Students' proficiency level according to the self-assessment grids of the European Framework for Languages!

Business English has not been implemented in high schools so far, therefore, for all students this course was a new dimension in their language learning, with a totally new approach. See graph 1.



Graph 1 Students' acquaintance with Business English

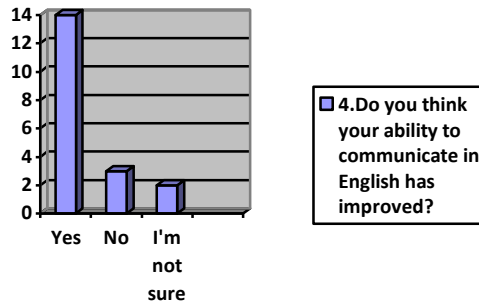
Most students were not familiar or were not aware of being taught with the task-based approach where they were required to develop the language communicative competence by acquiring a useful language kit and by raising the level of gaining sufficient self-confidence in order to express themselves. Now that a communicative task was a priority in each lesson, they could see the difference. See graph 2.



Graph 2 Students' acquaintance with the task-based approach

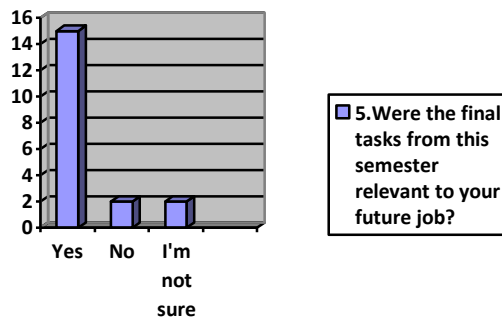
Very few students were skeptical and doubtful that this approach can make a difference in developing their language communicative competence. Nevertheless, the majority of students feel they have improved their ability to convey their opinions, their thoughts, and their knowledge in a certain field more precisely with more detailed information in English language. They are already aware of their progress, which is motivating for their further process of learning a foreign language. See graph 3.





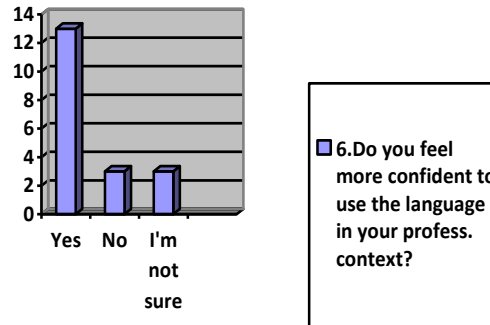
Graph 3 Students' awareness of improving

Nearly all students recognized the relevance of the task with their studies, and some positions that they can occupy with their degree in the future. Yet, there were some that could not find the tasks relevant or were not convinced in their relevance, considering the fact that they weren't sure what tasks their future job may consist of. See graph 4.



Graph 4 Students' opinion about the relevance of the tasks

For the greatest part of students, self-confidence is already at a higher level, which liberates them from their personal fears of participating in a conversation. Thus, their inner eagerness to dialogue in English has immensely enhanced, and their motivation to show what they have learnt and to find a solution to a problem together within the team has truly increased. Therefore, skills and techniques for having healthy discussions about an issue, by making compromises, by negotiating, etc. have been developed indeed. Nonetheless, there are always a few, that can't break the ice, and hide themselves in the shadow of their anxiety to speak out. For those, the best solution would be to join a class with lower level of proficiency, same as theirs', so they would feel more comfortable to express themselves among peers with approximately equivalent knowledge. See graph 5.



Graph 5 Students' confidence to speak

#### 5. BENEFITS OF APPLYING THE TASK-BASED TEACHING IN THE BUSINESS LANGUAGE CLASSROOM AND DESIGNING SPECIFIC FINAL TASKS

Task-oriented learning offers plenty of advantages for both teachers and students. When it is applied in the language classroom, students are free of language control most of the time. They can use all their language resources rather than just practising one pre-selected item. Furthermore, the teacher provides a natural context, which he develops by converging students' experiences with the language and their personalized language needs, relevant to their studies and their future profession.

What is more, students will be much more exposed to the language they really need with this particular approach that creates a natural surrounding around them, appropriate to practise a whole range of useful lexical phrases, collocations, and patterns, necessary for developing their language communicative competence in their professional context.

The course of the lesson depends on students' needs, which dictate what actually will be covered in the lesson and at what pace the lesson will be developed and will lead to a progress. This is a highly communicative approach where students spend a lot of time in communicating, which encourages and motivates them to do their best, because they are actually producing the language.

#### 7. CONCLUSION

From all papers consulted and analysed for this particular study, we can conclude that task-based instruction offers a very simplified approach to language learning and makes it more natural because of the fact that it takes place in a real world context based on real world language needs. In the Business English context, it ensures the effective use of the language by permitting students to make simulations of situations related to their future work. In this context, Bremner elicits 'the need to bridge the gap between the culture of the classroom and the reality of the workplace.'<sup>4</sup> As Stephen Evans was motivated to help

<sup>4</sup> Bremner, S. 'Collaborative writing: bridging the gap between the textbook and the workplace'. English for Specific Purposes 29/2. Elsevier. (2010): 121–32. <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0889490609000647>

‘to narrow the gulf that inevitably separates the office and the classroom’<sup>5</sup> seems to be the best option to prepare students to cope with common situations that they will be dealing with in their future workplace. The final task in the Business English classroom for each lesson should closely resemble the tasks performed in the workplace, which is not always a case with the activities in the book that sometimes differ greatly from the tasks seen in the workplace. Consequently, the teacher is the one who should adapt or modify the existing activities in the book or entirely design new ones that will respond better to students’ future job requirements. For this reason, teachers must explore what certain fields of the labour market require, in order to be able to understand better what kind of tasks current professionals perform in English, and how they can set similar scenes/simulations in their classroom.

This study enabled me to gather qualitative and quantitative data on the impact of applying the task-based approach in the Business English classroom. Along the implementation of the set of newly-designed final tasks, related to the professional context of a group of students, the assumption that the communicative competence will be acquired or developed resulted with a greatly positive response. The results shown in the graphs, and explained above in details, sum up the teacher’s expectations on the positive influence of the experiment. In consequence, students’ awareness of the improving their abilities to express themselves effectively in English in a natural context for their studies and their future job, has remarkably increased. They acknowledged the relevance of the elaborated tasks and accepted enthusiastically the challenge to try something new in order to make progress in the effective usage of Business English.

In conclusion, the core of the task-based approach is the task. Teachers should bear in mind that the task itself should correspond with the students’ real language needs within the real world language context, so students would be able to practise and produce convenient language for their studies or work. They should be exposed to the corporate world not only in their mother tongue, but also in the foreign language, in order to ensure an effective usage of Business English in everyday workplace situations. This increases their motivation, their desire to do more, to do better, to improve, to go a step forward. This promising approach ensures, and guarantees this increasingly qualitative progress in acquiring the communicative competence, which is more than essential for language learning. It enables students to become communicatively competent, and it allows them to shape, to concretize, to personify, and to embody their ability to communicate in their future job thanks to the teacher’s efforts to improve the communicativeness of the course, by conceiving interesting final tasks related to their real future job requirements.

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<sup>5</sup> Evans, Stephen “Designing tasks for the Business English classroom”, *ELT Journal, Oxford Journals*, *ELT J* (2013) 67 (3): 281-293. doi: 10.1093/elt/cct013 <http://eltj.oxfordjournals.org/content/67/3/281.full>  
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