

Activity-based (Task-based) Teaching

(based on Lynne Cameron: Teaching Languages to Young Learners)

We often present activities to children without any respect to their understanding the purpose of the task. Pupils should know the meaning and purpose of the activities they are supposed to do. The activity should make sense to them. Sometimes they are anxious to please, they just want to fulfil the task and they act as if they understand. This may happen when they make gap filling exercises, matching or other tasks where more or less mechanical approach can be used.

The demands placed on pupils when they do the task can be divided into two groups: Cognitive demands and Language demands.

Cognitive demands want the pupils to understand the way the material (e.g. a picture or a set of pictures, authentic material, exercise...) is presented and organized. Children should understand what are the key points and actions in the material, what is the sequence of actions and if they show present or past actions etc.

Language demands want children to find vocabulary to describe the material, and the actions, to find the endings for the past or presents tenses (depending on the material presented). Pupils should put the words they have found into the right sequence, they should pronounce the words correctly with the right stress and intonation when the words appear in chunks and sentences. They also should understand teacher's instructions and explanation, and feedback.

There may be other demands beside the language and the cognitive:

Interactional demands. These demands mostly depend on the way how the activity is organized and which type of interaction is required. E.g. pair work, group work, frontal work, individual work. They have to communicate with other participants, sometimes more sometimes less. They can also talk to adults or peers.

Metalinguistic demands. These demands include the use of terms about language used during production, instruction, feedback etc. E.g. *noun, past tense, verb ...*

Involvement demands. These demands vary according to the level of difficulty of the task. They also depend on the length of task stages, on the links to child's previous knowledge and interest, on novelty, and humour.

Physical demands. These demands involve the length of how long the pupil has to sit still, whether fine motor skills are needed (writing, drawing), whether the children have to run or jump, and do some physical exercise.

The teacher wants the pupils to be successful in their work. Therefore s/he provides support to the learners. S/he uses pictures, grids, context, graphics etc. S/he organizes the task in the way which makes the task easier. Anyway there is a certain balance between the demands of the task and support. If the demands are too high, the task is too difficult and the support is not adequate, learning goals are not achieved. If the teacher provides too much support then the task is too easy and the pupils will not learn much. *"A task that is going to help the learner learn more language is one that is demanding but not too demanding, that provides support but not too much support. The difference between demands and support creates the space for growth and produces opportunities for learning."* (Cameron: 2008)

Following can be task support:

Cognitive support. It comes from the contextualisation of language, graphic formats, activities, from familiar topics or content.

Language support. This support comes from familiar language items, from the language learnt before. Mother tongue compared with L2 can be a support, too.

Interactional support. This support includes the type of interaction, which depends on organization: Pair, group work, help from classmates, the use of well known routines.

Metalinguistic support. It comes from clear explanations and instructions. It involves the technical terms used.

Involvement support. This support comes from the child's previous experience, interest, and concerns. Good organization of the lesson can affect this support when the teacher incorporates physical movement and calm, and also seated activities where necessary in good balance.

Physical support. This support involves variations in sitting and moving, use of routines, and fine motor skills development.

When the teacher is planning the lesson s/he must set clear and appropriate language **learning goals**. The long way towards the goals should be divided into smaller stages, smaller steps. Each step deserves its sub-goal. Basically we distinguish three stages with each task that cover pre- during and past activities. They are: **Preparation, core activity and follow up**. Each part can be divided into more steps. Preparation activity prepares the pupils to be able to do the core task successfully. The core activity contains the language goals. The follow up activities complete the core.

The activities and the content chosen must be appropriate for children's age and their social and cultural experience. The topics and the language taught must be adequate to their age. The language grows with the children.

The tasks that are presented to pupils should have:

Meaning and purpose for children

Unity of topic, activity and outcome

Clear language learning goals

Learner's active involvement

A beginning and end

Demands, support and goals are three basic things the teacher bears in mind when s/he makes his/her planning. All three must be carefully linked.