



## The Main Criteria of Constructing Task-Based Reading Activities for ESP Learners

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### Abstract

*The target goal of the current paper is to thoroughly elaborate and introduce the main criteria of constructing task-based reading activities for ESP learners with the specialization of architecture and construction. There are several reasons why ESP students may benefit from a task-supported or a task-based syllabus. The majority of second language acquisition researchers agree that instruction is more effective when it is primarily meaning-based. But at the same time, it's also supplemented by timely focus on language features such as grammar, lexis, pronunciation and pragmatics. Tasks have the potential to generate many opportunities for meaningful language use. By definition, tasks are meaning based. Tasks, however, also provide a platform for language focused instruction. Proponents of task based approaches do subscribe to both the ideas of learner-centered education and learning by doing. Learning the language via task-based practice clearly involves learning by doing as students are engaged in activities that resemble what they do in real life using the language. Last but not least, tasks, if they are carefully selected, can also provide students with practice that's relevant to their academic, occupational, vocational, or social survival purposes. In the ESP context task-based approaches stimulate not only language competence in all four skills, but they also help to develop the skills necessary for success in working life, such as: group-work skills, problem solving skills, presentation skills, discussion skills, negotiation skills, making compromises, intercultural competence in an international setting, study skills, learner motivation. Thus, in the current paper a comprehensive light will be cast upon the four main criteria ("focus on meaning", "communicative problem solving", "relationship with the real world", "non-linguistic outcome"), which should undoubtedly be taken into consideration in the process of constructing a task-based reading activity for the ESP context.*

**Keywords:** *English for Specific Purposes, Task-Based Language Teaching, reading skills development;*

The aim of the current paper is to elaborate and introduce the main criteria of constructing task-based reading activities for ESP learners specializing in architecture and construction, and thus provide conditions and perspectives for the integration of task-based reading activities into the ESP course program in National University of Architecture and Construction of Armenia.

Over the past few decades, task based language teaching has been integrated in foreign language education programs to improve the quality of language teaching, however its characteristics and criteria have not been extensively studied. Based on constructivist learning theories of learning and teaching methodologies of communicative language, the task-based approach of language teaching has been founded due to some limitations of the traditional presentation, practice and production approach (PPP) and had the point of view of language teaching, outlining the process of presentation, practice, and performance. Hence it is important to note that language learning is a process of communication and social interaction development rather than a product internalized by practicing language elements, and that learners master the target language more powerfully when exposed to significant task-based activities naturally [6].

To understand the task-based language teaching deeply and to define its approaches first of all we must define the task itself. Professor Jack C. Richards gives the following definitions to a task:

- it is something that learners do, or carry out, using their present language resources or those that have been provided in pre-task work
- it has an outcome which is not simply linked to learning language, though language acquisition may occur as the learner carries out the task
- it is relevant to learners' needs
- it involves a focus on meaning



- usage of communication strategies and interactional skills
- it provides opportunities for reflection on language use [5].

One benefit of the task is the fact that they can integrate a focus on meaning with a focus on language, and can also provide students with practice that's relevant to their academic, occupational, vocational, or social survival purposes. Needs analysis is the best way to find out what tasks might be useful for and relevant to a particular group of ESP learners.

Task-based reading skills development is one of the core aspects of task-based instruction as a complex multilayer approach to language teaching. So, reading as a communicative activity, the reading purpose in the ESP classroom and the concept of task-based reading instruction should be logically and interrelatedly involved in the process of constructing task-based reading activities for an ESP classroom.

It is a widespread assumption, that reading is more interesting and the text information is better understood and recalled when reading is purpose driven, it follows that creating purpose in the classroom reading situation will enhance readers' interest and performance. But how narrowly should the concept of purpose be defined? In the broadest sense, even the most traditional textbook comprehension exercises provide students with the purpose of reading a text for specific information. Yet traditional comprehension questions generally address all information in the text in an undifferentiated manner. This kind of even, comprehensive coverage is well intentioned but unfortunately results in a levelling of content, as if all ideas or aspects of the text were equally important. In short, there is no reading perspective. Beyond comprehension exercises, purposeful reading can also be part of whole communicative tasks in the foreign language classroom. Nunan defines a communicative task as a "piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing, or interacting in the target language while their attention is focused on meaning rather than form" [3]. TBLT uses communicative tasks as the key unit for creating language learning activities. It describes one of the ways of developing intermediate level reading skills through a variety of pre-reading, while-reading, and post-reading tasks. Reading in a target language is a complex interactive process that encompasses two important acquisition areas - understanding information and enhancing language proficiency. The complex nature of the process necessitates special approaches to task development.

In general, task based activities, lessons, or sequences of lessons have been described in terms of three phases. These three phases reflect a chronological order in which they occur.

- **pre-task stage:** this stage includes the range of activities that teachers and students can do before they begin the task.
- **during-task phase:** concerns the task itself.
- **post-task phase:** this phase entails activities and procedures that are completed as a follow up to task performance.

So, the extensive theoretical and practical analysis of the target research materials has brought us to the detailed elaboration of the following four main criteria of TBL reading:

- **Focus on meaning:** Learners are exclusively focused on conveying the meaning as the language or the form is not the primary focus. The form is perceived not intentionally but intuitively and it is supposed to be consolidated in the process of carrying out the tasks.
- **Communicative problem solving:** Group work and pair work activities, where learners carry out a kind of survey and report their finding to the rest of the class. Activities of these type are introduced below.
- **Relationship with the real world:** Authentic professional topic and well adapted subject-specific material, which is not too long to bore the learners and not too easy to seem useless waste of time.
- **Non-linguistic outcome:** Tasks are assessed in terms of the non-linguistic outcomes of the task. So, the teacher is not only interested in the quality of the language used during task performance, but also whether the actual communicative purpose of the task has been met or not (see: the nine task-based activities introduced as extra activities in the end of the paper).

As it has been stated above, on the basis of the four main criteria a series of task-based reading lessons has been elaborated and practically experimented with the 2nd year students (B1) of National University of Architecture and Construction of Armenia. As it is clear, the English language teaching in this context is very specific and it touches upon the fundamental professional issues that are interesting and necessary for the future architects or civil engineers to learn. Hereafter one of the task-based reading



lessons is introduced, where 3-phase theoretically founded practical activities are successively presented after the text titled "Types of Houses" :

*TEXT: Types of Houses*

### British Houses

The largest and most expensive type of house is a **detached house**, which is not joined to other houses and is surrounded by a garden.

**Semi-detached houses** or **semis** are extremely common in Great Britain. They are built in pairs with one house joined to the other one along one side. A typical semi-detached house has two floors and three bedrooms.

**Terraced houses** are built mainly for working-class people. Four or more houses are joined together in a row. There is little or no front garden, so the front door of each house opens onto a pavement. They usually have two floors with two bedrooms upstairs.

**Cottages** are small, very old village houses.

**Bungalows** have only one storey, and this makes them especially popular with older people.

High-rise **block of flats**, sometimes over 20 stories with several flats on each floor, were built in many cities in the mid20th century.

### American Houses

Most houses are **detached**, but there are also **duplexes**, which are similar to British semi-detached houses. **Mansions** are very large houses where rich people live.

In the cities many people rent an **apartment** in an **apartment block**. An apartment with only one room may be called a **studio** or a **loft**. A building in which the apartments are owned by the people who live in them is called a **condominium**, or in some places a **co-op** or even **condo**.

### Armenian Houses

All types of houses can be found in Armenia too. But unlike the British and the Americans, many Armenians do not live in detached houses but in block of flats. These are **residential buildings** that have five to nine floors, though a lot of fourteen and a few sixteen-storied buildings have appeared in the recent years. Because of the overpopulation of the capital, the old houses have been **pulled down** and **high - rises** have been built instead. Today, those who can afford rich housing build new detached houses, and their number has increased considerably. These houses look like **castles or fortresses**, with a little land attached. Some are really well designed.

### Pre-Reading Phase

The pre-task phase aims to prepare the performance of the task in order to make sure that it is conducive to language acquisition. Peter Skehan suggests this can be achieved by introducing activities that enable students to focus on language in addition to content while they're engaged in the task itself. Two types of pre-task work can assist in meeting this goal, **language-focused** activities and **content-focused** activities. Language-focused activities may introduce new language, for example, in the form of vocabulary or grammar. They may also recycle existing linguistic resources, for example, reminding students of vocabulary items and grammar they have previously covered. Content-focused activities engage learners with the topic of the forthcoming task.

1. **Pre reading discussion – prediction – Look at the following picture and try to guess the topic of the text: suggest titles that would match these picture (pictures are provided).**
2. **Group Work - Match the following pictures and the words or word-combinations (pictures are provided).**
  - a) rainbow house b) loft/studio c) edge house d) cabin e) igloo f) dancing house g) hut h) wheeling apartment.
3. **Vocabulary preparation procedure – Skim through the following words in BrE and AmE and try to find their equivalents in Armenian.**

#### BrE

semi-detached house  
block of flats  
flat

#### AmE

duplex  
apartment building / a. block  
apartment



*granny flat*  
*bungalow*  
*terraced house*

*mother- in- law apartment*  
*ranch house*  
*row house*

**While-Reading Phase**

In the while-task stage, learners focus on actually completing the task. At this stage, students may work individually, in pairs, or groups. Teachers may opt to work with students closely, providing assistance with task-relevant language, ensuring that the intended task procedures are followed, or assessing learner language and progress the task outcome. Alternatively, teachers might assume a more passive role and offer help to students only when communication problems arise, or when students request it. In the while-task phase, a primary focus on meaning is encouraged, whereas the post-task stage is generally seen as a platform for promoting more explicit attention to form, grammar, and language.

1. Information transfer activity:

***Fill in the table with the types of houses that can be found in each country.***

British Houses	American Houses	Armenian Houses

2. Developing note-taking strategy and checking comprehension

***Make notes to complete these sentences:***

- Semi-detached houses or semis are built in...
- A typical semi-detached house has...
- Cottages are ...
- Bungalows have only ...
- Mansions are ...
- An apartment with only one room may be called a.....

**Post-Reading Phase**

There are a number of ways in which the teachers can facilitate an increased orientation towards form and language features. In this case, the teacher can act as a moderator. The public presentation of the product is expected to generate more formal and planned language use. Finally, as part of the post-task phase, the teacher may engage students in overtly focused language activities. This could target linguistic features which are relevant to or appear problematic for the students during task performance.

1. **Reacting to what they read:**

Did you find anything interesting in the text?  
 Was there anything surprising for you?

2. **Pair – work activity:**

- Think about the house of your dream and describe it to your friend. Then find out his/her version and share it with the class.
- Read the following hints and match the descriptions with a corresponding picture, writing the name of the type of house next to each picture (*pictures are provided*).

- a) These type of houses are attached to each other in a long row. They are usually found in towns and cities and generally are two to four-storied buildings.
- b) These houses share a central wall. They usually have a small garden in front and a larger garden at the back which is divided by a fence.
- c) A two - storied flat.
- d) A house where all the rooms are on the ground floor. As there are no stairs inside, many elderly people prefer living in it when they retire.
- e) A stone building which is part of a farm. Some of them have thatched or tiled roof. Today many people who work in the cities buy this type of house, so that they have a place to go for a weekend.
- f) An expensive and comfortable flat at the top of a tall building.



- g) An apartment building in which each flat is owned by the person living in it but the building and shared areas are owned by everyone together.
- h) A house covered with leaves and flowers.

**Extra Activities:** (pictures are provided)

1. You are a realtor from "Houses for Sale" Real Estate Agency. Advise the house pictured below.
2. You are a clerk. Two (or more) other students are probable buyer(s). Recommend the detached house pictured below.
3. You want to rent a country cottage for your family. Phone the landlady and ask her all possible questions.
4. Work out a plan of an ideal flat for a family of 3(5) people.
5. Describe the interior design of the house pictured below. What changes would you make to make it more comfortable and modern.
6. You have moved to a new flat in a Yerevan Suburb. You like it. Bring all possible arguments to persuade your friend to move to this district. Speak in favor of the place.
7. Speak about the advantages or disadvantages
  - a) of your present home,
  - b) having a country house.
8. Discuss with your friend
  - a) your family country house.
  - b) what is a well (or badly) planned flat?
9. Write a thank-you note to the parents of your friends for an imaginary weekend stay at their home.

So, task-based reading is based on the belief that students may learn more effectively when their minds are focused on the task, rather than on the language they are using. The activity must reflect real life and learners focus on meaning; they are free to use any language they want. Besides, task-based approaches stimulate language competence in all four skills but they also help develop the skills necessary for success in working life, not just in studying languages.

It should be noted in conclusion, that the criteria of task-based reading skills development of ESP learners analyzed in the current paper may surely help LSP (Languages for Specific Purposes) teachers to devise and conduct task-based reading lessons for the development of the professional communicative language competences of the ESP learners.

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