

## TASK-BASED TEACHER TRAINING: A CASE-STUDY

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*The paper describes a task-based teacher-training module aimed at language teachers' professional development both in the PRESET and INSET contexts. Basing on the test group experience, the paper outlines the module's place in the curriculum, training approach and methodology, the module's content, organization and evaluation.*

*У статті розглянуто дизайн тренувального модулю, що має за мету професійний розвиток викладача іноземної мови в рамках підходу, спрямованого на навчання шляхом вирішення професійної проблеми. Підсумовані результати роботи експериментальної групи, методика викладання, організація змісту та оцінювання рівня професійного розвитку учасників.*

The task-based approach (TBA) has been around for some time now and has had its influence on many aspects of EFL acquisition. However, EFL teacher training appears to have been less influenced by TBA, especially here in Ukraine.

If the reflective model of teacher education implies creating new developmental meanings from concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation and active experimentation [7], the TBA, which prioritises meaning, communication and taking meaningful decisions, provides an ideal framework to stimulate reflection and PRESET and INSET professional development, as 'training methodology should be largely task-based and inductive' [3:35].

Ukrainian EFL community proves to be acquainted with the TBA for language learning. There are many publications on this subject available in the local teaching resource centres. However, the TBA for EFL teacher training has its specificity which should be discovered and analysed. Despite obvious advantages the TBA may involve certain risks and the trainees should be aware of them and be able to compensate for them.

The purpose of this paper is to outline the rationale for a task-based teacher training module design, stressing the potential benefits of the TBA for the language teachers' professional development and forecasting the ways to compensate for the possible weaknesses of the approach.

**A Test Group Profile.** The task-based teacher-training course materials were developed by the author for Ukrainian EFL professionals with more than 8 years of teaching experience who applied for the National Teacher Trainer Summer School (Kherson, Ukraine).

The organising committee clearly stated the purpose of the Summer School to attract experienced professionals from all over Ukraine to take part in the National Trainer Development scheme. Trainees were selected on the basis of their applications and statements of purpose.

In the group trained 17 participants represented different teaching contexts - from secondary schools, universities to INSET training institutions – and different age groups – from 24 to 40. Five trainees had less than 8 years of teaching experience but this violation of the application requirements was compensated for by their enthusiasm and sound theoretical background. Only three trainees had teacher training experience. Aimed at further professional development, trainees seemed to be open to whatever approaches trainers suggest. With their modern methodology background they were quite capable of making sense of the principles and ideas which underpin the TBA.

At the same time pre-session talks with trainees and in-class observations showed that few trainees were really motivated to consider teacher training activity to be their possible career path. The majority went on considering the Summer School trainer training only from their language teaching perspective. It was clearly demonstrated in their needs analysis questionnaires in which trainees asked for more 'practical tasks for students', 'ideas for assessing students', 'hints how to teach students of different levels', etc.

**A Place in the Curriculum.** The training module "The TBA in Teacher Training" was scheduled on the third day of the Summer School, which took six

working days. The course itself was task-based. Trainees were to give a micro-training session at the end of their training.

The preceding sessions covered the following issues:

- Group development
- Adult learners: dealing with resistance
- Learner-centred approach
- The good teacher/trainer
- Teacher's/ trainer's roles
- Models of teacher education
- Reflective model

Those sessions were to deal with creating productive atmosphere inside the training room, with raising the trainees' awareness of their values, teaching beliefs and principles they preach in their professional activity and with recognising some theoretical fundamentals relevant for teacher education.

This done, it seems logical to pass on to the issues connected with the course content organisation and presentation as the TBA provides an ideal framework within which the issues tackled before can be realised successfully and which stimulates reflection and further professional development.

After the TBA session the course implied the following issues to be practiced:

- Training skills: giving input, pair/group work, observation, getting and giving feedback
- Managing change and supporting oneself.

These issues help trainees focus on developing their professional skills for their values, beliefs and approaches chosen to be effectively implemented in the training room.

Thus, the course program described above leads the trainees from general understanding of the nature of teacher training and specific features of androgogy, via determining the strengths and risks of existing approaches, to exploring the anatomy of trainer-trainee relationships and finding the individual strategies to promote reflection and learning in the training room.

**The Training Approach and Methodology.** The best training approach to deal with the topic “The Task-based Approach to Teacher Training” is the task-based approach which seems to set up an ideal framework for reflection in teacher education. Trainees do not only reflect about the TBA, they also experience how it works in practice. Meaningful practical tasks stimulate trainees to share their ideas and cooperate. Trainees are involved in designing a training session by means of what a significant part of the responsibility for thinking and decision-making is shifted over to them. The target group is expected to be responsive to the approach chosen as their knowledge of modern methodology, practical teaching experience and enthusiasm create necessary grounds for taking challenge of professional problem-solving.

**The Sequence and Organisation of the Content.** In order to implement and run a module devoted to the task-based approach, the first thing that I felt was needed was to refer to trainees’ knowledge and experience of the TBA for language learning and then to proceed to reflection on the TBA in teacher training. This idea, expressed by L.Cameron [1], lead to splitting the module into two sessions: the first is devoted to the fundamentals of the TBA in language learning/teaching, while the second aims to get trainees to think of the opportunities the TBA provides for teacher training. Besides ‘starting from where they are at’ principle, such division aims to raise trainees’ awareness of their potential needs as prospective teacher trainers and to tune them on considering the topic from this perspective. The module makes an attempt to incorporate awareness-raising practices [2:92] in order to develop trainees’ conscious understanding of the principles underlying the task-based approach.

The first session ‘*Learning the Ropes of the TBA*’ may serve as a practical demonstration of how to build a lesson/session around a task, following the model outlined by Willis [8]. We use a *story telling task* which involves recounting background knowledge and generalisation. This task is also diagnostic to reveal trainees awareness of the topic.

The next activity – *Information gap* - simulates the task-based learning environment and aims to get the trainees to reflect on the theories underlying this approach, its merits and possible constraints. Having modelled the class, using the trainees as ‘students’, a questionnaire is given out for the group and open class discussion. The aim here is to draw the trainees’ attention to some of the ideas which underpin the activity in which they have just participated and to make them further reflect on the suitability of the TBA for their teaching context and personal teaching style.

The questions offered can be adopted if they seem too sophisticated for trainees, which may be the case with ITT or INSET for teachers with no previous experience of the TBA. For example:

- This task included time to prepare before you spoke. Why do you think you were given time for this? What would be the effect of giving students no preparation time before they were asked to carry out the task?
- The class included repetition of the task. Why? What are the benefits of task repetition?
- In general we can say that during the class the focus of the students is on either communication (using the language to express their own meanings) or the language form (thinking about the grammar and vocabulary that they use). Can you identify at least two stages which focus on each of these?
- Why do we need to balance the amount of time and attention we give to these two factors? [4:13].

The following activity - *A good task is ...* - brings trainees back into the ‘teacher’s shoes’ and asks them to analyse samples of various tasks, determine their types and feel the specificity of each type, and finally, to generalise and formulate the criteria of a good task. This focus seems relevant for teacher trainers both in terms of materials development/adaptation and in term of organising a task-based activity in the classroom.

By the time trainees approach task 4 – *The Components of the Task-Based Learning Framework* – they have refreshed task samples and learning/teaching experience well enough to be able to reflect on the task-based learning components. This activity begins with a pre-task stage introducing the task. This involves brainstorming the conditions necessary for successful learning a foreign language. This is followed by the task cycle consisting of the task performance (trainees study the diagram, reflect and discuss the questions in groups, formulate their ideas), planning and reporting back.

Task 5 aims to help trainees summarise the ideas expressed during the session, to define advantages and possible constraints of the TBA and to reflect on the ways how to explain the principles of the TBA in foreign language learning to teachers and students. This task has a creative output: motivational posters exhibited and presented to the whole group.

The round-up which consolidates the outcomes of the session also gives trainees a time-out to reflect on the materials of the session and record their ideas in the activity grid.

In such a short course as the Summer School it is difficult to rely on pre-session reading. So the first session input was based merely on trainees' previous experience and eclectic materials chosen as 'gambits' to activate memory, start the discussion or summarise the ideas expressed. However, I feel I cannot approach the second session without asking trainees to do the follow-up reading. The articles chosen are to help them appropriate the ideas of this session and prepare themselves to look at the TBA from the teacher training perspective.

The second session – *“Express Consultancy”* – aims to extend trainees' insight into the TBA to teacher training and offers them a problem solving role play. The session is carried out as a total loop input as the “content”, the “process” and “subject” of presentation are the same [9:14].

The case was derived from a real-life situation of the Summer School in Kherson prompted by the session on the learner-centred approach and by numerous questions trainees asked as to how they should design a final micro-training session.

Besides, on-going feedback received before the TBA session showed dominant interest among trainees in collecting various handouts and activities while the messages for reflection and rationale behind each activity were overlooked. That is why the aims of session 2 to raise trainees' awareness of the opportunities a task-based approach provides for EFL teacher training were further customised to include the following points:

- to get the trainees to consider the aspects necessary to prepare a training session, to prioritise these aspects and account for this ranking
- to have them analyse the available resources critically when preparing the training materials
- to engage them into the process of planning a training session, and thus,
- to provide the trainees with the first-hand experience on how to design a training session and how to evaluate it critically.

To introduce the case I played the role of an inexperienced trainer who was forced into the topic of the TBA for teacher training without being convinced that the task-based approach, which is good for language learning, can be equally good for teacher training. The risk for me to 'lose the face' as a trainer was compensated for by my 'doing the homework' and offering a 'hodge-podge' of materials, which I collected when preparing a session, as a resource pack for my 'consultants'.

Together with some short articles, excerpts from the books and diagrams, a resource pack contained a number of different activities, tasks, handouts. A range of task types which trainees could exploit included ranking, categorising, listing, writing, discussion, role play, problem solving and so on. A resource pack is an important management tool in this role play. The choice and form of materials' presentation in the resource pack should be checked and modified taking into account trainees' needs and background level.

The case has been modified for this assignment for it to be told as a story, while in the Summer School it was 'dramatisation'. In any other training context the trainer starts playing the role of a newly-qualified trainer in Task 2. Trying to get professional confidence, he casts doubts on every vague argument, while, in fact, he



monitors, and provides step by step feedback on, ‘consultants’ production. This step-by-step consultancy creates a natural necessity for trainees to look for arguments in order to be able to instruct and advise. Newly-qualified teachers and trainers naturally rely heavily on books. It does not matter how much I may favour the TBA, unless I know how to work with and exploit textbook material in terms of this approach. The ‘consultants’ are expected to advise on the focus of the topic and the preparation procedure (What about? For whom? Why? How?).

The trainer’s feedback, both in its content and form of expression, is of crucial importance at this stage of the session as trainees’ behaviour, when their plunge into the task, demonstrates their customary practice of ‘solving a puzzle task’ trying to glue the activities together to design a lesson. Step-by-step consultancy also gives the trainer an opportunity get ‘consultants’ back on track if they get driven by their stereotypes. To use this opportunity the trainer must have a set of clearly formulated messages he wants to put across to his trainees, being also aware of hidden messages he may communicate [5:159], and sophisticated interpersonal skills to implement the appropriate intervention strategy.

The round-up activity is aimed to get trainees to reflect on their hand-on experience of the task-based activity with teacher training in mind. After Cameron [1:350] the message I tried to convey emphasised that both training and classroom tasks can be constructed by working outwards from the goals of the core activity. They, thus, provide both trainers and trainees with insights into methodology, generate goals for teachers’ professional development and useful input data for training tasks. Within the context of a ‘meaning-driven’ approach several rounds of tasks repetition raise trainees’ awareness of both facets of the TBA – for language learning & for teacher training.

**The Module Evaluation.** The overall effectiveness of trainees’ performance during the module is to be evaluated by trainer’s and peers’ observation of their consultancy presentations and by means of a trainees’ individual essay in which they are expected to share their personal feelings and reflect on the opportunities to use the TBA in their teaching/teacher training context.



Summing up, the module described is to create conditions for ‘enriched reflection’ [6:7] at it is designed to base learning on personal professional practice and to test the validity of trainees’ insight into the issue through their shared experience and learning-by-doing. This training approach may be adopted for a longer INSET or PRESET course with more time to be spent on task design, materials adaptation/development and task-based micro-training. The materials may also be used in the initial teacher training with the focus of reflection shifted from teacher trainees to language learners.

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