

How to Make Upper-Level University English Classes More Interactive

Upper-level English classes often pose special problems for teachers. At some universities, upper-level students learn English by using the technical language of their degree program, such as medicine, business, information technology, or some other field. Known as English for Specific Purposes (ESP), this type of English instruction integrates the specialized subject matter of the field into the classroom. ESP requires the acquisition of highly specialized terminology and the ability to explain formal processes as students prepare for the high-level competence they will have to demonstrate in their chosen careers. Because this advanced material is often difficult and challenging, students can easily fall behind or become nonresponsive. It is therefore imperative for teachers to use methods that make upper-level classes effective and communicative. One good solution is task-based teaching, which links pair and group work with relevant activities to make language lessons more inter-

active, thus increasing student engagement and comprehension. This article describes how I implemented task-based teaching to improve language learning in an upper-level ESP class for engineering students.

Task-based teaching and oral communication practice

Before I learned about task-based teaching, two main problems in class were to find more time for students to communicate and to motivate them to talk. If activities are primarily focused on drilling and studying grammatical forms, it is difficult for students to communicate since the language situation they are put in is rather unnatural, and their roles do not demand the use of authentic language. They therefore treat language learning as routine and simply go through the motions. Task-based learning produces the opposite effect, as is evident by the definition of task given by Willis (1996, 36): “a goal-oriented communicative activity with a specific outcome, where the emphasis is on

exchanging meanings, not producing specific language forms.” Tasks based on relevant student interests and aspirations increase the meaningful use of language, and when tasks are focused on meaning, learners have better “opportunities in the classroom to use the language for genuine communication” (Willis and Willis 2007, 4).

Task-based activities set up social situations so that students can have meaningful discussions with one another. When students use English to cooperate and interact with each other, classes are more effective. According to Brown (1994), interactive classes have the following beneficial features:

- There is a large amount of pair and group work.
- Students engage in spontaneous and authentic conversations.
- Students write for actual audiences and purposes, not artificial ones.
- Tasks prepare students for the real world outside of the classroom.

Group and pair work

Group and pair work are indispensable to task-based teaching. This type of classroom arrangement creates a completely different atmosphere from that of a traditional teacher-centered class; instead of strictly controlling the students, the teacher coordinates their work. According to Brown (1994), group work creates a favorable climate for communication by relieving students of the anxiety of having to talk in front of the whole class. Brown reports miraculous changes in students who had been too shy to talk until they worked in groups. In addition, group work makes students more responsible and autonomous—they have equal responsibility for performing a task and find it “difficult to ‘hide’ in a small group” (Brown 1994, 174).

Group and pair work also increase the speaking time for each student in a class. According to Byrne (1988, 31), “unless you have a very small class, you will never be able to give your students enough oral practice through whole class work.” For example, if you have 30 students and 30 minutes of oral work, each student will at most have only one minute to talk; “on the other hand, if you divide your students into pairs for just five minutes, each student will get more talking

time during those five minutes than during the rest of the lesson” (Byrne 1988, 31).

Organizing group work

A fundamental consideration is how to arrange the students to perform a task in pairs and groups, and teachers must find solutions to problems such as cramped classrooms and having to pair up students of different language levels. Although a classroom with moveable tables and chairs is ideal, many classrooms have rows of desks that are permanently attached to the floor. In this case, one solution is to ask the students in one row to turn around and talk to the students sitting in the row behind them. In this way, they can face each other during their conversation, which I believe is better than talking to the student sitting next to them. This method also works when dividing students up into groups of four: two students who sit next to each other can turn around and work with the two students sitting behind them. Sometimes I ask my students to leave their desks and find partners themselves. However, if it takes them too much time to decide, I pair them up myself or number off the students and assign each pair a place in the classroom.

Some teachers avoid doing group and pair work in class because it is noisy. But how is it possible to learn a language silently? If my students are noisy but they are speaking English, I feel satisfied. In some cases, when there is too much noise in the classroom, I use a simple but efficient technique with stoplight cards described by Jacobs and Hall (2002, 55): “A green card goes on the desk of groups if they are working together quietly. A yellow card indicates they need to quiet down a bit. When a red card is put on their desk, the group should become completely silent, and all should silently count to ten before starting work again.” With time, as students regularly practice group and pair work, they learn to work more quietly.

A series of language learning tasks

I first encountered the amazing possibilities of interactive techniques for preparing students for real-world language use when I discovered the following six tasks categorized by Willis (1996) that form a chain in advanced order of complexity:

1. *Listing*. Students work individually or in groups to gather facts about a topic by brainstorming, researching, and interviewing. This provides plentiful data and activates their background knowledge and experience of the topic.
2. *Ordering and sorting*. Students sequence or rank the facts, vocabulary, or ideas about a topic in a meaningful order.
3. *Comparing and contrasting*. Students point out the similarities and differences in the information they have gathered.
4. *Problem-solving*. Students create and evaluate a hypothesis related to a problem and analyze possible solutions.
5. *Sharing personal experiences*. Students engage in conversations and discussions about topics that have personal relevance.
6. *Creative tasks and projects*. Students collaborate to produce a written, oral, or multimedia project that summarizes the important things they have learned from task-based work.

These techniques are especially valuable for organizing group or pair work, and they can be based on almost any text, adapted to almost any topic, and used in any class. While performing these tasks, students engage in spontaneous discussions, solve problems, and prepare presentations. These activities help students communicate freely and overcome the psychological barrier to communication that so often occurs in a classroom setting. While it is difficult for teachers to reproduce in a classroom all the situations in which students may need to use English in real life, these kinds of tasks will help students be better prepared to undertake real-life challenges. They will train learners to use language spontaneously outside the classroom, and allow them to use important language functions correctly, including “agreeing and disagreeing, interrupting, asking for repetition and clarification, changing the subject or the emphasis, highlighting the important part of the message, guessing at meanings and making inferences and so on” (Willis and Willis 2007, 136). One of my students once told me that he had been able to give directions to a foreign visitor in English. The visitor was very grateful because until he met my student, he

had not been able to find anyone in the street who could speak English. My student said that the communication in groups and pairs in class helped him in that situation, even though we had never practiced giving directions in our lessons.

Task-based teaching in action

Using Willis’s (1996) series of tasks is convenient and practical because implementing them does not take much time or require many resources. When implemented together they form a task chain of increasing complexity that is an excellent method for creating communicative activities for any topic. However, this does not mean that teachers have to use them all for every topic, or even use them in the given order. It is possible to use only one or two if a teacher is short on time or has difficulties developing six tasks for the same project. In addition, as was my case, the type of project may require switching the order of the six tasks.

I adapted the tasks for a project based on a reading passage from an ESP textbook titled *The Language of Mechanical Engineering in English* (Hall 1977). The project was made relevant and interesting by focusing on the environmental problems caused by engineered devices used in our everyday lives and the students’ reasons for choosing engineering as a career. Combining these relevant topics with task-based teaching is a way to “involve learners in different types of extended discourse. It provides an arena for informal spontaneous interaction” (Willis and Willis 2007, 136).

Although task-based teaching exposes students to all four skills, I made sure to supplement all the tasks with meaningful writing that was used to inform the class. According to Willis and Willis (2007), writing complements oral activities and provides opportunities for language focus because “speaking is a real-time activity, in which there is normally no time for careful consideration of language. Writing, on the other hand, allows time to think about language” (117).

The following tasks were performed as post-reading activities to elicit further discussion of the text’s main aspects, although the same tasks could easily be adapted for pre-reading activities. The students did the following activities in two subsequent 90-minute

lessons. However, other teachers can adapt the tasks to their own class schedules.

Task 1: Listing and ordering

(Time required: 20 minutes)

The first task is listing and ordering, which allows students to review and activate what they know about the topic and related vocabulary. First, students brainstorm about the words they need to talk about the ecological and social consequences of cars, computers, and cell phones, products that are part of our everyday lives. This task is especially suitable for making words and phrases available that the students will need to discuss and write about the environmental and social consequences of technology. As students brainstorm and volunteer words, the teacher writes them on the board. Students are allowed to ask the teacher or other students the meaning of words they do not know.

Then, the class chooses the most essential vocabulary and the teacher circles the words. Students then form groups and organize the chosen words into three columns labeled *Nouns*, *Verbs*, and *Adjectives* as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Listing and Ordering Nouns, Verbs, and Adjectives

NOUNS	VERBS	ADJECTIVES
environment	cause	dangerous
diseases	pollute	electromagnetic
waves	waste	uneconomical

Finally, the students create phrases by combining the adjectives and the verbs in different ways with the nouns. Some examples are: “pollute the environment,” “cause diseases,” “dangerous diseases,” and “dangerous electromagnetic waves.” The teacher writes these word combinations on the board.

Task 2: Problem solving

(Time required: 40 minutes)

In groups, students record two problems each caused by cars, computers, and cell phones. Then they suggest a solution for each one of the problems. Next, a representative of each group reports to the whole class what problems and solutions they recorded, and the teacher compiles the list, as is illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2: Identifying Problems and Solutions

PRODUCT	PROBLEMS	SOLUTIONS
A. Cars	1. pollute the air 2. waste energy	1. use filters, ecological fuel, solar batteries, and electric engines 2. make economical hybrid engines that work on mixture of petrol and biomass
B. Computers	1. ruin people’s eyes 2. cause carpal tunnel syndrome	1. use modern LCD monitors and glasses with filters 2. improve design of the computer keyboard and mouse
C. Cell Phones	1. emit microwaves that influence the brain 2. produce chemical waste when batteries are thrown away	1. use Bluetooth earphones 2. improve recycling technology

Task 3: Sharing personal experiences

(Time required: 50 minutes)

In Task 3 students individually write a short paragraph (110 to 140 words) explaining why they have chosen the profession of an engineer, why they are attending this particular university, what they would like to do after graduation, and how English will help them in their future career. Then, in pairs, they read their paragraphs to their partner. Finally, students exchange papers and report their partners’ information to the class. Following are the paragraphs written by one classroom pair.

Student 1

I have chosen the profession of engineer because I like cars. Kyiv Polytechnic Institute is the most prestige technical university in Ukraine. So I decided to study here and become a good engineer. After my graduation I would like to work with cars, be an engineer in a sport car racing team. It’s a very interesting profession because you always should create new technologies in autosport. Autosport is not developed in the Ukraine. That’s why I want to work abroad, and so I need to know English.

English is the most popular language in the world, and I could communicate freely with the specialists from other countries, and we could work on new technologies together.

Student 2

I'm studying in the National Technical University of Ukraine because it was my dream. It is one of the famous Ukrainian Universities. It gave education for many famous people. Now they are the pride of our country. I'm studying at the Mechanical Engineering Faculty. One of the best students of this faculty is Alexander Yablonsky. He is the great mechanical engineer and now lives in USA. Maybe in the future I will be a great engineer too. As for me, English is the best subject in my study program. I speak English not as good as I want, but I try very hard. The English language helps me very much with the Internet. In the future I want to be a teacher in my University and English can help me to communicate with my colleagues from other countries.

Task 4: Comparing and contrasting

(Time required: 25 minutes)

In pairs, students exchange the paragraphs and write down three similarities and/or differences between their paragraph and their partner's paragraph. Then, they report the differences to the whole class. Following are examples of the differences Student 1 and Student 2 found in each other's paragraphs:

Student 1's observations:

1. My partner wanted to study at KPI because it was his dream, and I wanted to study at any good university.
2. My partner wants to be a teacher at the university, but I want to be an engineer in a car racing team.
3. English can help my partner to communicate with his colleagues, and it can help me to improve new technologies.

Student 2's observations:

1. My partner wants to study in KPI because he wants to work with cars. I want to study in KPI because it was my dream.
2. My partner wants to work in the future with a sport car racing team. I want to work at my University.

3. My partner wants to work abroad. I want to work in the Ukraine.

Task 5: Creative task and project

(Time required: 45 minutes)

Students are directed to write a paragraph (140 to 160 words) about three new things that they think will happen in engineering over the next fifty years. These paragraphs are then displayed in the classroom so that all the students can read them. Following is an example of one student's paragraph:

As we know, technical progress and the development of engineering is the same. So I think that in the future there may be some changes in technology as:

- The reduced influence of petroleum and gas and an increase of using new types of energy (more economic, safer for the environment), and the development of the new branches of engineering to deal with their production.
- The increase of computer technologies in manufacturing and in daily life. People will stop working so much as executives and will begin to work more as operators who control the work of computers.
- The rapid development of aerospace engineering, the exploration of space, creating new kinds of spaceships, the building of the new space stations to improve communications, and the start of the regular flights to the moon. That will be the new stage of the engineering and human evolution.

A natural focus on form

For teachers who might be afraid that the focus on grammar is lost in this sequence of task-based activities, it is important to note that the opposite is true. In fact, during the whole task sequence, as they are absorbed in the meaningful content, students naturally take the time to decide what types of vocabulary and sentence structure they will use to best express their messages. "They may

stop to search for the right word to express the meaning they want, or to look up in the dictionary a word they are not sure of. Or they may stop to wonder if a sentence they are planning to produce is grammatical, or if it can be improved in some way" (Willis and Willis 2007, 113).

Conclusion

Using these task-based activities in my upper-level ESP classes has really helped encourage my students to communicate in English and made my lessons livelier. At first I was afraid that my students would be too shy and reluctant to participate in the activities. I was especially concerned because my groups of engineering students consist mainly of young men, and I tend to find that male students are, on the whole, less talkative and more reserved than female students. But I was both surprised and inspired by the fact that they did not object at all to performing the tasks, and I could even see that they enjoyed doing them. I also observed that even the quietest students spoke more freely in groups and pairs than in front of the whole class. My fear that students would speak their native language instead of English was also unfounded. There were several such incidents, but on the whole it was not a problem because the students had more time to speak English and they gradually got used to it.

In closing, I would also like to mention that because the students' communication in groups and pairs is much like real communication between people outside of class, they now feel more confident as English speakers. And I feel more confident as a language teacher!

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