

Barbara Jurša Potocco
Faculty of Health Sciences
University of Primorska

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THE USE OF TASK-BASED LEARNING AND TEACHING IN ESP COURSES FOR TERTIARY STUDENTS OF KINESIOLOGY AND DIETETICS

Abstract

This teaching report examines how the principles of task-based learning and teaching were applied to two university-level ESP courses, namely a course for second-cycle students of Dietetics and one for first-cycle students of Kinesiology. The paper briefly outlines the main language learning tasks used in these courses: for students of Dietetics, the tasks included a role play of a dietetic consultation with a focus on counselling skills and a clinical focus, a structured class debate on the universal applicability of plant-based diets, and a role-play of a job interview in the field. For students of Kinesiology, the tasks involved preparing a short physical activity break for the class, designing different sports and physical activities for different groups of clients, furnishing a fitness studio and pain assessment. The report also reflects on the teacher-perceived effectiveness of these tasks and the challenges accompanying their implementation.

Keywords: task-based learning and teaching, English in kinesiology, English in dietetics

1 Introduction

This teaching report presents its author's concrete classroom experience of incorporating Task-Based Learning and Teaching (TBLT) into two English for Specific Purposes (ESP) university courses that were implemented in the academic year 2022/2023 at the Faculty of Health Sciences, University of Primorska, Slovenia – one for second-cycle students of Dietetics, and one for first-cycle students of Kinesiology. The paper outlines some of the language learning tasks that had been designed for these courses and reflects on the challenges faced by the concrete teacher in implementing these tasks, the teacher's perception of students' responses and how the implementation of these tasks might be improved in the future.

1.1 Theoretical Background

Firstly, let us take a brief theoretical glance at TBLT, a well-established communicative approach to teaching a second language. In simplest terms, Willis described language learning tasks as "activities where the target language is used by the learner for a communicative purpose in order to achieve an outcome" (Willis, 1996, p. 28). Nunan used the concept of a communicative task to refer to a teaching method that involves interaction, the use of authentic texts, a focus on the learning process itself and the learner's personal experience, as well as a link to language activities outside the classroom (Nunan, 1991, p. 279). According to a far more recent definition of a TBLT task, one put forward by East, a task is characterised by "a focus on communicative meaning and fluency, some kind of gap to be worked out by students, and an outcome beyond the use of language" (East, 2021, p. 48). Based on Van den Branden's (2006) definition of a TBLT task, the latter may also be said to have a goal which requires processing some input, creating some output and interacting with others to meet the goal.

The cited definitions of the language learning task all shed some light on why this method could seem appealing and empowering to university students, who are by default adult learners: it requires from them at least some degree of direct personal involvement in the form of negotiation of meaning, decision-making and problem-solving, and in the activation of these competencies resembles real life. A task in TBLT is always related to some real-world activities. In the context of English for Specific Purposes, this feature of TBLT makes this method remarkably motivating to students, who are aware of the fact that all the learning activities in which they participate inevitably bring them a step closer to mastering real-world skills that will be needed throughout their working life. As Cubillo and Brenes (2009) note, the main goal of a task in Language for Specific Purposes (LSP) should reflect what learners need to do in real-life situations at the workplace. According to East, the task may be called "real-world" if it draws on the kinds of *language* that may be used in real-life contexts, or the kinds of *skills* that learners might draw on in a real-life interaction beyond the specific task (East, 2021, p. 58).

Another critical point about TBLT is that grammar is not put in the foreground of the teaching process, and that it is considered and dealt with in a student-dominated way, which fits in well with university-level ESP courses, where the majority of students, at least in the context of Slovenian universities, seem to be relatively proficient in general English. It thus makes sense for an ESP university teacher to follow the TBLT method in making room for

grammar primarily when the latter is needed and foremostly by providing corrective feedback to students.

The primary goal of TBLT is automaticity in language use (East, 2021, p. 17). If we take as the starting point Michel's concept of the complexity-accuracy-fluency triad (Michel, 2017, p. 50), TBLT arguably targets the development of fluency to the possible detriment of accuracy. Michel's model describes different aspects of language use that need to be mastered by learners, where accuracy refers to the use of language that is free of error, while fluency refers to the smooth production of language with only a few pauses; complexity is, on the other hand, defined as the elaborateness and diversity of the second language performance (East, 2021, p. 15). Although language learners may not necessarily be deprived of complexity of language use, given the wide range of tasks that may be offered to them, and the authentic texts they may be equipped with, fluency does seem to stick out as the one aspect of language prioritised by TBLT. In line with this argument, Wu et al. (2016) have found no statistically significant difference in reading achievement between ESP students receiving task-based instruction and students in the control group, but did establish a notable positive effect of TBLT on students' listening and speaking competency. Interestingly, Iranmehr et al. (2011) have, on the other hand, reported a significant advantage of teaching ESP through tasks specifically in connection to reading comprehension (Iranmehr et al., 2011).

According to Willis (1996), language learning tasks may be divided into closed (highly structured) and open ones. They may comprise listing items, as well as ordering, sorting or comparing them; problem-solving; sharing personal experiences, and performing creative tasks or projects. East distinguishes among three basic types of tasks in terms of whether they involve problem-solving, decision-making, or opinion exchange among students, and further categorises them into an information gap, a reasoning gap, and an opinion gap (East, 2021, p. 49-50).

1.2 Research Aim

The aim of this paper was two-fold: the first was the descriptive aim of exploring different possibilities open to ESP teachers in the health-related fields of dietetics and kinesiology through an outline of task-based activities implemented in two concrete tertiary-level ESP courses. The second objective was a critical reflection and evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of these concrete ESP class activities.

2 Methods

The methods employed to meet the evaluative purpose of this study were teacher's self-feedback and student feedback. The student feedback procedure was limited to students' spontaneously made comments in class and their anonymous written feedback on the course obtained through an online survey. The latter was based on the questionnaire that is used universally for all the courses implemented at the University of Primorska, regardless of the study programme, and serves the function of an internal quality assurance system. The part of the survey that was used in this study were students' answers elicited by the following open-ended questions:

- 1) »Regarding the university teacher's pedagogical work, I would like to point out ...«,
- 2) »Regarding the course implementation, I would like to point out ...«,
- 3) »Regarding the scope of study obligations, I would like to point out ... (e.g. too difficult, too easy, too broad, or too limited study contents, too long chunks of lectures (in blocks of several lessons), or too dispersed or concentrated lectures, the number of (too many) exercises, mid-term exams, seminars, additional (home) assignments, exams etc.).«

The ESP course for (both first- and second-year) Master's students of Dietetics was an elective one, with a total of 60 contact hours, allowing for ample opportunities for feedback and reflection. Most sessions consisted of blocks of four lesson hours. Only about 10 students were enrolled. The minimum CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) proficiency level required for entry to the course was B1. The course was implemented in the autumn semester (October 2022-January 2023).

The ESP course for first-year first-cycle students of Kinesiology was mandatory and consisted of 40 lesson hours (10 lectures, 30 seminar exercises). A single session of the seminar exercises usually consisted of two-hour lessons. The seminar exercises were implemented in two sections, with 38 students in each class. The course was implemented in the spring semester (February-May 2023). The level of the English language proficiency required at the beginning of the course was B1.

3 Results

Most of the tasks presented in this study were open-ended creative tasks and were mostly done in pairs.

3.1 The Case of the ESP Course "English in Dietetics"

3.1.1 A Dietetic Consultation – Focus on Counselling Skills

The first task was role-playing the first dietetic consultation with a new client. This included many pre-tasks. Students were first introduced to the topic of counselling skills in dietetics and the concept of motivational interviewing (MI) through a handout with excerpts from university textbooks and questions for reflection.

After this warm-up, in which they made some guesses about the topic, we watched a series of videos: in the first, an experienced dietitian explained the principles of MI in general and specifically the OARS (Open Questions, Affirmations, Reflective Listening, Summaries) technique, as both represent one of the key counselling methods used in dietetics, and gave some concrete examples of applying this method in practice, including the specific wording that may be used by dietetic practitioners. Before the listening, the students were presented with the second handout, which contained a few questions on the presented technique, and they were asked to formulate their answers during and after the listening. We discussed their answers as a class before proceeding to another video.

The next listening focused on a model dietetic consultation that demonstrated different MI skills described and explained in the previous listening exercise. The consultation involved a first-time client recently diagnosed with Type 2 Diabetes. The listening exercise was done as a video gap-fill, where only parts of the transcription were used, and through the participation of the whole class. Afterwards, students watched another video of a role-play between a dietitian and a diabetic patient, with two vignettes which illustrated how a dietitian-patient interaction may play out depending on the use or absence of counselling skills. Prior to watching, the students were asked to compare specific aspects of verbal and non-verbal behaviour of both the dietetic practitioner and the patient, and to note down their observations, which were afterwards discussed.

Finally, the students were given a handout which guided them to learn how to structure a dietetic consultation, with some examples of what a dietitian would usually say in a particular phase of a dietetic counselling session.

After this lengthy preparatory work, the students were asked to plan and role-play their first consultation with a new client in pairs. The client's presenting problem was decided by each pair, so they had to negotiate shared decision-making as the first step of this task. During the role-play, which was the outcome they were assigned, the pairs were listened to only by the teacher and not their peers, which would also be an option, but would take more time. All the students took turns playing the roles of both the dietitian and the client.

In the post-task, students were asked to attempt self-reflection through a class discussion about their role-play experience. However, the session ended without sufficient time for adequate reflection. At this point, the students let the teacher know that they found this task very useful and that they would like to do it again.

3.1.2 A Dietetic Consultation – Focus on Clinical Nutrition

Based on this feedback, this task was done again, but with a modified starting point and only after we had already covered a review of some common disorders and diseases that affect the functioning of the human digestive system as well as some of the prefixes and suffixes typical of medical terminology. The focus of the second dietitian-patient role-play was on clinical nutrition; students were not asked to imagine they are dealing with a client in a private consultancy, but rather a patient referred to them due to some serious health issue. The pre-task involved deciphering the type of medical information they could expect to find in a referral letter. In the role of a clinical dietitian, students were provided with the information on the patient that had been referred to them, and each received a different handout with a different diagnosis. The information consisted of both the referral letter and extensive commentary on the case (tips on what they should focus on in their consultation) from a textbook titled *Clinical Cases in Dietetics*. Students had to ensure they understood all the terminology, which we also discussed as a class and wrote down on the whiteboard before they started their role-play. They took notes on the key points to consider, and made a written plan for their consultation. This may have included the questions they needed to ask, or essential pieces of information they needed to relay to their patient. After this time-consuming pre-task, each was assigned a partner to work with. Before assuming the role of the patient,

students also had to read the referral letter that described their case. After role-switching, they evaluated their performance in pairs based on some teacher-prepared questions (e.g. *Did you closely follow your plan? What did you find difficult? What would you do differently next time?*). Because the students already had some knowledge on as well as some experience with how to structure a dietetic consultation, they could perform the task with more confidence than the first time. We also allowed for ample time for reflection. Students appreciated a hands-on experience with managing a consultation, which may become a part and parcel of their career-lives, and the fact that this task allowed them to synthesise their hard-won knowledge from various subjects.

3.1.3 A Structured Class Debate on the General Pros and Cons of Plant-Based Diets

The structured class debate on a specific topic was a very straightforward task, and revolved around whether plant-based diets could and should be universally applied to everyone, regardless of their age and health status. In the pre-task, the students were randomly (irrespective of their personal views) allocated to the pro and contra groups, and asked to brainstorm their ideas together. They were told that they could also browse for some ideas and research evidence using their smartphones. As a group, they had to agree beforehand on the arguments and research they would include in their discussion, and on who will say what. The outcome they had to achieve was the performance of two two-minute talks per group, with a five-minute break for reflection and preparation for the second bout in between. A stop-watch was used to ensure that the allocated time was not exceeded. The members of each group were taking notes during the first round of speeches while listening to their opponents to be able to respond to their arguments in the second round. As already mentioned, both groups were provided five minutes to decide on the response to their opponents' talk. In the end, students were asked to reflect on how the groups performed, and they agreed both groups were equally persuasive. As a post-task, students were asked to write a one-page essay defending their individual position (a stance that they personally identified with as a student of Dietetics and a future allied health professional). They handed in their work and received the teacher's feedback during the next session.

3.1.4 Job Interview

The outcome of the last task presented in this section was the role-play of a job interview in the field of dietetics. The pre-task involved reading a magazine-type article on effective job hunting for registered dietitians and watching a video with sample job interview questions and model answers specific to registered dietitians. The students were also handed a list of twenty questions that could be posed to a dietitian during a job interview and that had been compiled from the mentioned video, and asked to think of ways in which they could effectively respond to these questions. As part of the assigned task, they were asked to imagine they were applying for the post of a registered dietitian in a local clinic. The outcome of the task was playing both the role of the human resources manager and that of the job applicant. The students had to select five questions from the twenty-item list that they would pose to their interviewee, and were asked to take notes on the answers they would get during the

interview. As for the post-task, they were asked to decide whether they would employ their partner, based on her performance (all of them were female students) in the interview, and to substantiate their answer, so they had to provide some feedback. When reflecting on their performance as a class, students agreed that this task helped them to become more aware of the need to prepare for real-life job interviews, as the types of questions typically encountered in this usually stressful situation may be challenging to respond to effectively without prior deliberation and proper practice.

3.2 The Case of the ESP Course “English in Kinesiology”

3.2.1 An Exercise Break

The first task, a short physical activity break, which was used to interrupt long bouts of sitting in class and which could generally be used in any school or workplace setting, was implemented throughout the course. The outcome consisted of each student presenting a set of exercises to the whole class - besides demonstrating them, they also had to provide clear instructions. As a pre-task, students had to choose or design the exercises at home, but one part of the pre-task was also done collectively in the classroom: through interactive video gap-fills and miscellaneous written-type exercises (matching or rearranging, gap-fill) based on authentic texts from kinesiology textbooks, students familiarised themselves with the genre and discourse of exercise instructions as well as the names of various exercises. However, the task proved too time-consuming, given the total number of enrolled students. Additionally, it was not challenging enough for most, so it should be modified in the future to be more specific in content (e.g. a group of students could be asked to work together on a set of exercises to activate a specific muscle group, or exercises aiming to prevent injuries in a specific sport). The task was too repetitive, as some exercises tended to be recycled by students repeatedly, with only little preparation on their part. In the future, only one or two sessions should be devoted to this task.

3.2.2 Common Workplace Communication Scenarios

In this section, we are referring to five distinct tasks. Due to lack of time, each student performed only one of them, depending on the group they were allocated to. All the groups were asked to design and plan different types of sports or physical activities for specific groups of clients, and to present these to their colleagues, imagining they are addressing their clients. All the groups were provided with help sheets with a few sample ideas and vocabulary items they could check in case they struggled with either. They were asked to brainstorm their own ideas prior to checking the help sheets.

The outcomes were diverse: the first group presented a fifteen-minute workout in an exercise class for seniors, and had to explain the reasons behind their choice of the selected exercises. The second group planned an end-of-the-year sports day for third-graders and their parents for a local elementary school; the task also constituted explaining the rules of the games they had prepared and listing the required equipment. The third group had to present a short physical activity session for pre-schoolers that focused on the development of

primary movement patterns; their task involved reflection on how to present physical activity as children's play, and how to engage children by appealing to their imagination. The fourth group were asked to imagine they were planning group swimming lessons for very young children who were complete beginners (non-swimmers); they had to provide parents with the basic information on the swimming course, which included safety precautions, required equipment, price and the logistics of where and when the course would be implemented. The last group were asked to imagine they were working in a summer day centre for pre-teens and had to prepare an attractive weekly schedule of activities at the centre; these had to include outdoor and indoor activities as well as focus on the development of both gross and fine motor skills.

As a post-task, we reviewed what students recognised to be new or less familiar vocabulary items as a whole class, while students were also asked to decide which of the tasks was probably the most difficult one (the answer was "the one on primary movement patterns").

3.2.3 Furnishing a Fitness Studio

The third task concerned the language of using fitness equipment and, again, required some creative shared decision-making. Students first did some brainstorming in pairs to compile a list of essential fitness equipment, checking the help sheet only if needed. Then they made, in pairs, a spatial plan of their own mini fitness studio, which they furnished with only eight pieces of equipment of their choice. Finally, the required outcome was to work in groups of four, where one pair guided the other through their fitness studio, explaining how each piece of equipment should be used, while the second pair took on the role of first-time visitors (clients). Pairs then provided feedback to each other and were asked to decide together which of the two fitness studios was equipped better. Overall, some students found this task extremely easy while others struggled.

3.2.4 Pain Assessment

The last task to be mentioned here focused on pain assessment. Students worked in pairs. In the pre-task, they reflected on the best possible definition of pain (they had to compare two definitions) and the potential difficulties or complexity of pain assessment (the subjectivity of pain and problems health workers face when assessing children's pain or the pain of people who are unconscious or have cognitive development problems). They were asked to compare several pain assessment methods that were shortly presented to them on a handout through pictures and only a few words - they had to categorise them into those based on self-report and those based on observation of behaviour, but also had to think of which of them was probably the most accurate one. They had to compose written answers to all the questions in pairs, so this was a co-writing exercise, but their answers were checked in a discussion that involved the whole class. Most of them found this part of the task difficult but also interesting. Finally, they were asked to formulate a list of questions that might be posed to a patient or client as part of a comprehensive pain assessment beyond mere pain intensity. They did this in pairs, too, and they also had to role-play a pain assessment dialogue, which they did not find difficult in the least.

4 Discussion

The first problem that needs to be addressed is that any task may seem too difficult or too easy at the same time, i.e. too easy for some students and too difficult for others, while the teacher is expected to cater to the needs of all students. Some need considerable guidance, while others need additional subtasks because of how quick they are, so the teacher needs to be extremely attentive and responsive. The above-mentioned underlines why TBLT can be used more productively in smaller classes, also because tasks may be very time-consuming. In designing language learning tasks, we should aim for the appropriate level of complexity and difficulty to match learner needs (Cubillo & Brennes, 2009), which remains a constant challenge, given that students are never a homogeneous group. In addition, the lack of expertise or professional background in the field may make it difficult for the teacher to identify the suitable types of tasks, and also makes it difficult to provide meaningful feedback to students beyond mere language performance. Overall, it is difficult to design effective tasks that would be cognitively challenging, or mentally taxing, in just the right amount, as we need tasks that are neither daunting nor boring.

In our case, the tasks for kinesiology students were more manageable in terms of terminology, reflecting the fact that they were first-year students of the first-cycle study programme, while the tasks for second-cycle students of Dietetics could involve the use of more difficult authentic texts and more complexity even if they were more structured. All the students of Dietetics were highly motivated, which might be due to the fact that this was an elective course, and they also had more field-specific knowledge they could draw on when performing the tasks. The feedback on the course received from these students, both in person and through the student survey system, was quite positive; the students commented on how the class was conducted in a dynamic way and allowed them to get a comprehensive overview of how the English language is used in this field. The first-cycle course was met with less enthusiasm, which could also be attributed to the fact that the tasks were more general in content and were not as closely related to their future work.

Some of our other observations include the fact that students in both courses tended to communicate in their mother tongue when working in groups or pairs, regardless of their level of proficiency in English. Error correction may also become an issue: sometimes it may seem inappropriate for the teacher to publicly correct a particular student, so error correction may need to take place with some time gap and no reference to individuals, but in more general terms; another practical problem is that the teacher may also forget to correct a student if they do not wish to interrupt them while they are speaking and the teacher is taking notes only mentally and not on paper. We have also already mentioned how time-consuming tasks may be. For example, time is needed for the teacher to check that the students have understood the instructions group by group. Given that the teacher does not have a lot of control over vocabulary acquisition in TBLT, they may feel it would be more time-efficient to use other approaches to teaching to boost students' vocabulary expansion. For reasons of timing, we may be tempted to leave out the non-linguistic outcome of the task or any genuine feedback, and to not exploit tasks to their fullest potential, to the detriment of their meaningfulness. As regards practical implementation, we should also mention potential spatial constraints; for example, most lecture rooms at our faculty do not allow students to face each other, and

with small lecture rooms packed with students, students may also get distracted by the noise the other groups or pairs are making.

Despite these practical concerns, TBLT seems a sound approach to designing quality university-level ESP courses, first because it prepares students for their professional lives, and, second, because it does not focus on grammar yet linguistic accuracy is, in general, attended to in the post-task. Designing tasks also appears to be a feasible way to engage and involve our students. This conclusion is in line with the findings by Kavaliauskiene (2005) and Whyte (2013), who both suggest that the methodological principles of TBLT can be fruitfully and widely applied in teaching ESP at the university level. Outside of the context of ESP, researchers in the field of teaching English as a second language have reported students' positive attitudes towards TBLT and the latter's power to engage students' motivation (Huang, 2015; Hadi, 2012).

To the best of our knowledge, this is the first paper to outline some task-based activities designed for and implemented in a university ESP course to support the development of the English language competence in the specific fields of dietetics and kinesiology. The major limitation of this study concerns the employment of teacher's self-feedback, as this method may be heavily biased due to the subjectivity of the teacher-researcher who is an active participant in the teaching they wish to investigate. Further research on this topic warrants the use of more rigorous methods, such as semi-structured interview or customised questionnaire targeting students' experience of particular tasks, in combination with teacher-teacher feedback.

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Izvleček

LSP teaching report – Uporaba dejavnostno naravnane učenja in poučevanja pri visokošolskem pouku angleščine za kineziologijo in dietetiko

Prispevek na kratko predstavi uporabo dejavnostno naravnane učenja in poučevanja na področju angleščine kot tujega jezika stroke na primeru izvedbe dveh univerzitetnih predmetov, in sicer na drugostopenjskem študijskem programu Dietetika ter prvostopenjskem programu Kineziologija. Predstavljene so glavne dejavnosti oziroma naloge, ki so jih morali študentje opraviti tekom izvedbe predmeta: študenti dietetike so odigrali dietetično svetovanje, pri čemer so se prvič osredotočili na svetovalne veščine in drugič na vidik klinične prehrane, izvedli strukturirano debato na temo univerzalne primernosti rastlinske prehrane in odigrali zaposlitveni razgovor za delo na svojem področju. Študenti kineziologije so izvedli kratek gibalni odmor za svoje kolege, opremili in predstavili svoj imaginarni fitnes studio, pripravili načrt gibalnih aktivnosti za različne stranke ter ocenjevali pacientovo bolečino. Prispevek vključuje opažanja o učinkovitosti posameznih nalog ter razmislek o izzivih, ki so spremljali njihovo izvedbo.

Ključne besede: dejavnostno naravnano učenje in poučevanje, angleščina v kineziologiji, angleščina v dietetiki