

## **Analysis of “Task-based language learning and teaching: An action-research study” by Megan Calvert and Younghee Sheen**

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Calvert and Sheen’s article appeared in the journal *Language Teaching Research* in March 2015. In their study, the authors attempt to answer the following research questions: a. How can we use action research to improve the tasks in Task Based Language Teaching (TBLT)? b. How can teachers with limited experience and resources in task-oriented activities create some that engage the learners, fit their needs, and meet the learning goals? c. How can teachers evaluate the effectiveness of task-oriented activities?

This action research project was very challenging. Here, the teacher recorded and shared her experience designing a task for a course of English for occupational purposes, “English for hotel and food service workers”. The students (13) in this class were refugees looking to work in the hospitality and restaurant industries. First, none of the learners had prior experience in the food service or hospitality industries. Second, they had different educational backgrounds, English proficiency, and cultural and cognitive barriers. Third, the teacher had no direct instruction in TBLT or the use of tasks in her teaching. However, she designed a task for this course.

All the steps for an action research project were followed in this study. The first action was to design and implement a task-based activity in the classroom, then observe and reflect on the outcome. As expected, because of the teacher’s lack of experience in the field of TBLT and her challenging group of students, the first time, the activity wasn’t successful. On the contrary, it was full of misunderstandings and frustration. This first task just had 26% of accurate responses and most of the comments from the students on this activity were negative. The reason is that the first task was too complex for the students, didn’t take into consideration their cultural and cognitive barriers, and had insufficient scaffolding.

After reflecting on the results received from the first task, another action was taken. The first task had to be improved. It was necessary to review the code complexity of the instructions and take into consideration cognitive difficulties and cultural barriers. The instructions were structured in a clear way, more explicit teacher instructions were given, cognitive and cultural difficulties were taken into consideration, and the facilitating role of the teacher was improved. In the process of reflection, the teacher examined the results, discussed them with more experienced colleagues at her school, and studied relevant literature on TBLT. Also, there was additional practice with the language itself prior to beginning the task to level up the students’ knowledge on the vocabulary and expressions they needed to use in the task. After the improvements, when a second task was implemented, it received a score of 91.7% accurate responses and no negative comments.

The first task was improved and showed its effectiveness. The results on the second task (modified first task) demonstrated that a teacher with limited experience and resources in task-oriented activities was able to create, evaluate and improve tasks through critical examination and reflection.

The teacher's successful implementation of the modified task also led to positive changes in how she viewed task-based teaching. Although creating effective task-based activities can be time consuming, it was very rewarding to discover that through collaboration between teachers and students, improvement in learning activities can be achieved. Therefore, action research has been proved to be very beneficial to solve problems in the classroom and to improve the tasks in TBLT.

Some strengths of the study are the following. The article was well structured, and the author backed up her research with a good literature review. This was a good way to obtain detailed information on how to adjust task-based activities to improve the outcome of learning activities and it was a learning experience for both the teacher and the students as well.

As to weaknesses, the following two stand out. The conclusion of the article should have included the fact that teachers need to look at their students' needs, cultural and educational background before designing task-based activities or any kind of classroom activities. Not only the teacher's total lack of knowledge on task-based activities, but in basic steps for designing didactic materials created a great deal of unnecessary misunderstanding and frustration for the students in the first task.

The author revealed that in the first task she wasn't sure if the only pair of students that were able to complete the first task accurately received (or not) extra help from the teacher assistant. For this reason, data from some students (the low-literacy pair of students) were excluded entirely from this study. These revelations make it difficult to determine the objectivity, validity and reliability of the results in this study. The problem is that how can we be sure that the data (in both tasks) and findings were not manipulated (interfered) if this action research was carried out in the teacher's classroom and with only one group of students. Validity and generalizability of action research could be improved if the study is clearly carried out with the collaboration of teachers (at least more than one teacher and more than one group of students) who face the same problems.

Creating effective TBLT lesson plans with engaging activities could represent a big challenge for teachers but through action research we can create and evaluate our own task-based activities. Teachers will always have problems to overcome in their classroom and it is better to solve them with collaboration. Sometimes you can rely on research and online resources, but not all the time you have exactly what you need to meet your students' needs and your lesson goals at the same time.

More than once, we need to look for solutions ourselves and take advantage of our experience and creativity to design tasks or activities that are appropriate for the lesson and students' needs, and at the same time keep our students engaged in the classroom activities. However, most of the time, we don't share the solutions we find due to lack of time to discuss, document and reflect on what we are doing. This study, where a teacher becomes the researcher and finds solutions for an issue in the classroom, encourages us to do the same in our classrooms and share this information with peers and decision makers in our educational institutions. We can all make the difference, one teacher at a time.

## REFERENCE

Calver, M, and Sheen, Y. (2015). Task-based language learning and teaching: An action-research study. Language Teaching Research. Retrieved from

[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/323906906\\_Task-based\\_language\\_teaching](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/323906906_Task-based_language_teaching)