

10 techniques for task planning

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<http://www.mgu.ac.jp/~ic/helgesen/Helgesen.front.htm> (more ideas: see requested articles)

Task Planning (or Language Planning) is a fairly new concept in ELT. Most research is very recent and it is still very rare in textbooks. Yet is a natural concept. You've probably used it in your own language learning:

Think of the first time someone tries shopping in a foreign language. Before they go up to the clerk, they probably said to themselves, "I need to find *x*, so I've got to say '~~~~~' And then the clerk will probably say,

'~~~~~' Then I need to say, '~~~~~' " **That's language planning.**

In short, language planning involves giving the learners time to think about the task they will do. They focus on **what they will say** and **how they will say it**. At times, you'll want to guide them through that process. At other times, you'll want them to do it independently or in pairs/groups.

Here are some of the benefits:

- Increased complexity (with or without specific teacher guidance)
- Increased fluency (including more language, fewer pauses, less silence)
- Increased accuracy (when teacher-guided) (Sometimes. Other times the language jumps to a higher level so new errors occur). (*New, higher level errors. Progress!*)
- Greater vocabulary variety (they have time to remember the words they want that are not yet automatic).
- It helps learners avoid fossilization because they have time to think and don't have to rely on the "easiest thing to say [the way they already know]."

Although task/language planning is rare in textbooks, you can easily add it to nearly any book or lesson you are teaching. Here are some ideas:

1 Personalize listening questions. After a listening task, ask 3-5 questions about the learners, based on the listening topic. They answer about themselves. Example: If they were listening to descriptions of people, they would hear questions like: *How long is your hair? Do you wear glasses? etc.* Compare in pairs or small groups.

- If they compare answers, it builds fluency & complexity.
- If they try to remember the questions based on their answers, it works on accuracy (no reason you can't do both).

2 Expand on dialogs. Use the **3-minute conversation task**. Assign the topic.

Learners close their books. They **try to** have an English only conversation. With this technique, the dialog practice served as planning. Use *Innervoice* techniques.

For specifics, see: <http://tinyurl.com/3y3r4o>.

3 Work with the language map/target sentences. Do pronunciation work just before a fluency activity. It makes the learners aware of the forms which can will come up during the task (accuracy work). Here are some ways:

- *Listen and repeat silently.* Say the sentences. They repeat silently. They move their mouths but make no sound (OK. I know it sounds crazy. But try it. It really does help you notice pronunciation).
 - *Tap the rhythm.* The match rhythm and stress with pencils or fingers.
 - *Nonsense syllables.* Listen and repeat with nonsense syllables to focus on stress and rhythm (*Nonsense syllables: DAda DAdada*). Then they say the words.
- More ideas: http://www.efcafe.com/skill_sheet_sense.html

4 Preview the page. Give them a few minutes to look over the page, read the questions or task information before they start a task. They'll naturally start thinking about their answers. Use background music to fill the silence.

A note about **background music** during mental preparation activities: Try using relaxing background music to "fill up" the empty time. It helps you and the students be comfortable with silence. I usually use new age, light classical or world music. (I put the CD player on one side of the classroom and tell student that, if they don't like music, they can sit on the opposite side of the room).

5 Evaluate the questions. In a pairwork or groupwork that involves answers many questions, have them look over the questions before they start. They rate each for interest (☺ ☹ ☹). Then they start with the interesting ones.

6 English please. Have the learners, in pairs or groups, answer questions in their first language. Then, after a minute or so, say, "English please." They have to try to say the same thing, but this time in English. This allows them to think of their answers before having to explain those answers in a foreign language.

7 Guided visualization. Invite the learners to close their eyes. In a slow, relaxed voice, guide them through the situation they will talk about. This can be something they have really done or something imaginary. Encourage them to mentally experience the story and notice their experience. Do this by bring up items in different senses (called *sensory modalities*).

- Start with sensory neutral verbs (e.g., *experience, notice, sense, decide*, etc.)
 - Then ask questions/ give instructions that lead the learners through the three main senses (V – visual, A – Auditory, K – kinesthetic [also called *haptic*]). Use sensory specific verbs:

V: *see, look, view*. Have them notice what people and things look like.

A: *hear, listen, tell, say*. Then can notice language as well as other sounds.

H: *feel, touch, connect*. They notice physical sensations and emotions.

For more information, see: http://eltnews.com/features/thinktank/016_mh.shtml

For more on sensory teaching: http://www.eltnews.com/features/thinktank/025_1mh.shtml

8 Mental rehearsal. Give learners time to think about what they want to say. It is often useful to have them do this twice. The first time they *create the content* (think about what they want to say). The second time, they *create the form* (think about how to say it. You might give them a choice of the sensory modality they want to use the second time. Invite them to close their eyes. They think though the information they though of the first time. This time, they chose how to experience it:

- "watch the movie in your mind." Think about how to describe it (visual)
- "experience it again" and listen to the story. (auditory)
- "experience it again" and mumble along (or speak silently). (kinesthetic)

9 Draw pictures. Students draw pictures of events (real, imagined or hoped for) as a way of preparing to talk about them. As they do, they think about how they will describe the pictures. Hint: Many of our students are good artists and, as a result, want their pictures perfect. Ban erasers.

10 Task recycling Repeating an activity with a new partner can have amazing results with accuracy, fluency and complexity. Have them do a pairwork or groupwork (especially personalized tasks) with in a new partner.

Bibliography at: <http://www.mgu.ac.jp/~ic/helgesen/lpbib.htm>