

How varied are the tasks that TPDL participants design for their Learning Inquiry projects?

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Introduction

The pedagogy component of the TPDL programme requires all TPDL participants to complete a Learning Inquiry project. For this project they design a language task for their own classroom, teach this task and then evaluate it. The evaluation is written up as a report, handed in and marked as part of the assessment requirements for the pedagogy course.

My question

I was interested to know how varied these tasks, that TPDL participants designed for their classrooms, would be. In their book, *Doing Task-Based Teaching*, Willis and Willis (2007) describe seven different types of task. These are set out below:

1. Listing
2. Ordering and sorting
3. Matching
4. Comparing and contrasting
5. Problem-solving task and puzzles
6. Projects and creative tasks
7. Sharing personal experiences, story, anecdote telling

Willis and Willis (2007) explain that classifying the tasks like this helps to differentiate the cognitive challenges that they represent for students. Listing (Type 1) and ordering or sorting (Type 2), for example, are cognitively less demanding than telling a story (Type 7) or working on a project (Type 6). Willis and Willis also claim that a taxonomy such as this one, helps teachers think of the different ways in which they might design tasks and the different processes that learners might be involved in as they complete them.

In 2012 I asked TPDL participants to let me have their Learning Inquiry tasks after they had been marked so that I could see to what extent the range of tasks designed by 'TPDLers' covered the seven task types identified by Willis and Willis. I ended up with 49 tasks to classify according to the Willis and Willis taxonomy.

What did I find?

All of Willis and Willis's (2007) task types were represented! Interestingly, and perhaps not surprisingly, the most common task type was listing (Type 1). This is not an unexpected result when you consider that many teachers taking part in TPDL are teaching beginner, or near beginner learners, many of whom are in Years 7 to 10, so that a less cognitively demanding task is more

appropriate. The least common task type, again, perhaps not surprisingly, given the demographic we have just discussed, was 'sharing person experiences, story, anecdote telling' (Type 7).

An example of a task that was classified as a problem solving task (Type 5) is given below. This is a task that was designed by Elizabeth Warren (pictured below) and one which was shared at the TPDL 'Meeting the Challenge' conference in 2013.



Elizabeth had a Year 10 class of students of French whom she described as academically 'above average'. She wanted to challenge them and she felt that they would enjoy humour and the chance to be creative. These students had been exposed to the comparative structure in French in input that they had received, and Elizabeth felt that they were ready now to have opportunities to use the comparative structure in language output or production. She therefore devised a 'focused task' (Ellis, 2003) where they could use this structure. She made up some 'animal' riddles for them, as a model that they could work from (see Figure 1) and then she got them to make up more for homework.

Figure 1

Je suis plus petit qu'une grenouille
mais moins dangereux qu'un lion. . .

Translation: I am smaller than a frog but less dangerous than a lion . . .

The following day they had to present these riddles to the class for their classmates to solve. [at The 'Meeting the Challenge' conference, we shared some 'animal' riddles in other languages. See these in the attached Appendix]

Elizabeth said that if she were to use this task again she would have the students solve each other's riddles in small groups first, as the brighter students tended to dominate and guess before some of the others had had a chance to finish reading the riddle.

Elizabeth's task is an interesting example in that it reminds us that tasks can have learners working with language input, instead of, or, as well as, with language output. Here students had to first read the riddles and solve them (i.e., language input), then later they had the chance to make them up for each other (i.e., language output).

Details about the other tasks that TPDL participants in 2012 designed are in the article I published in the 2013 edition of *The New Zealand Language Teacher*, Vol 39, pages 7-14. It is called: 'Listing and comparing tasks in the language classroom: Examples of Willis and Willis's (2007) taxonomy in practice'. Note that if you join the New Zealand Association of Language Teachers (NZALT) (www.nzalt.org.nz) you get free and unlimited access to this journal.

What did I conclude?

There was evidence of a high degree of creativity and variety in the tasks that teachers designed to be taught in their language classrooms. It was also very encouraging to see that teachers, were, themselves creating options for tasks that correspond to those that the literature suggests are likely to be effective for student learning.

References

- Ellis, R. (2003). *Task-based language learning and teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Erlam, R. (2013). 'Listing and comparing tasks in the language classroom: Examples of Willis and Willis's (2007) taxonomy in practice'. *The New Zealand Language Teacher*, 39, 7-14.
- Willis, D., & Willis, J. (2007). *Doing task-based language teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Appendix

Animal riddles

At the TPDL 'Meeting the Challenge' conference in 2013, the National Language Advisors shared these 'animal' riddles with us. You might be able to use them in your own language classrooms. See the answers at the bottom of the page.

4. Tóu dài hóng màozi

shēn chuān bái páozi

shuōhuà shēn bózi

zǒulù bǎi jiàzi

头戴红帽子

身穿白袍子

说话伸脖子

走路摆架子

1. Nous allons, nous
venons, nous partons,
Sans jamais quitter notre
maison.

2. Por un camino muy
oscuro
va caminando un animal.
El nombre del bicho
ya te lo he dicho.

3. Was hat sechs
Beine, läuft aber
auf Vieren?