

Task-Based Language Learning: Old Approach, New Style. A New Lesson to Learn

**Aprendizaje basado en tareas: un antiguo enfoque, un nuevo estilo.
Una nueva lección para aprender**

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This paper provides an overview of Task-Based Language Learning (TBL) and its use in the teaching and learning of foreign languages. It begins by defining the concept of TBL, followed by a presentation of its framework and implications, and finally, a lesson plan based on TBL. The article presents an additional stage to be considered when planning a task-based lesson: the one of formal and informal assessment. The rubrics and a self-evaluation format appear as an additional constituent of any task cycle.

Key words: Task-based learning, framework, teachers' roles, students' role.

Este artículo presenta una visión general del aprendizaje basado en tareas y su uso en la enseñanza y el aprendizaje de las lenguas extranjeras. Comenzamos por definir el concepto de aprendizaje basado en tareas, seguido por una presentación de sus fundamentos e implicaciones. Finalmente, presentamos una lección fundamentada en el aprendizaje basado en tareas. El artículo presenta una fase adicional cuando se planea una lección basada en tareas: la relacionada con la evaluación formal e informal. Así mismo, se explica que una parte importante del enfoque por tareas es un componente de evaluación, el cual debe contener rúbricas y un formato de autoevaluación.

Palabras clave: aprendizaje basado en tareas, fundamento, papel del docente, papel de los estudiantes.

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What Do We Mean by Task-Based Learning?

Overview

Recently, the popularity of Task-Based Learning (TBL) has made many researchers, teachers, and methodologists evaluate the effectiveness of this approach. Although it has been used for many years, its popularity has increased. One of the main reasons for this attention is the desire of educators to promote real communication or the exchange of meanings rather than forms. Another reason for such interest is the fact that practitioners advocate better language learning when students are not focused only on linguistic forms. Researchers believe there is less anxiety and learning is more effective if language form *per se* is not the priority. If task-based instruction takes place, language learning is more meaningful and natural. The task is currently considered to be the most effective means of promoting second language acquisition (SLA) in the classroom. According to Richards and Rodgers (2004), “engaging learners in task work provides a better context for the activation of learning processes” (p. 223). These authors say the negotiation of meaning in TBL provides the input and output necessary for language acquisition.

If one wants to define a task, there is not a single definition. Here are some examples of how individuals in the field have characterized “task”. Nunan (1989) considers a task as “a piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is primarily focused on meaning rather than form” (p. 10). According to this definition, students will use prior knowledge in order to achieve their goal; if any new information is needed (e.g. linguistic forms or vocabulary), the teacher will act as a knower who provides it so that students do

not interrupt the process and achieve the expected outcome. For Willis (1996) a task is an activity “where the target language is used by the learner for a communicative purpose (goal) in order to achieve an outcome” (p. 23). It is more effective to use a meaning-based approach than a form-based approach. Students express their thoughts even if some of the language is inaccurate. In this respect, Skehan (1996) adds that tasks primarily focus on meaning and resemble real-life situations. Since tasks are goal-directed activities, participants decide which language forms to use to achieve the goal. Van den Branden (2006) explains how in second language research, tasks have been used to study language production, interaction, negotiation of meaning –all aspects to improve second language acquisition (SLA). This author defines a task as “an activity in which a person engages in order to attain an objective, and which necessitates the use of language” (p. 4). It is evident in this definition that there is a language form needed to perform a task; however, the language is the means not the end. Language is the vehicle to reach successful communication when having real-life communicative situations. Nowadays, the most commonly used and widely accepted definition of task is that of language activity in which there is a focus on meaning. We define Task-Based Learning as an approach that requires teachers to plan lessons, not merely class activities, for real communication.

All the definitions given above share the idea that tasks are goal-oriented activities and meaning-centered; tasks are designed to facilitate students’ participation in meaningful activities. Language involves communication and this communication occurs only when the environment offers the opportunity to exchange real and meaningful thoughts. Some of the differences rely on the fact

that a task has many purposes depending on the student and teachers' needs.

Despite the fact that TBL emphasizes meaning, form is not put aside. Each of the task models have a period in class to focus on form which is different from focusing on language as will be explained later in this paper. For example, Willis and Willis (2007) focus on forms at the end of each task cycle, which is defined as a sequence of tasks related to one another. There are three reasons to focus on language form at the end of any task sequence. First, learners understand language within a context. When performing the task, students undoubtedly prepare and make use of language. Second, students focus their attention on language use rather than language form. Each task, during the cycle, has different purposes and characteristics which capture the students' attention and interest in the language that will be used when achieving the target task. Third, students are exposed to language production and reception. Learners engage in real world activities that demand speaking and/or writing and understanding by listening and/or reading. In order for successful communication to take place, teachers do not have to correct every mistake. Teachers have to see language as a tool instead of an end, which means that errors are part of the learning process and not necessarily the result of bad learning or teaching. Therefore, meaningful tasks imply meaningful learning and end with meaningful communication. Likewise, the conditions under which a task is performed will have important consequences for the type of language used by learners in communicative tasks. Ellis (2003) refers to this situation when he says that Task-Based Learning and Teaching call for classroom participants to forget they are in the classroom, a teaching-learning setting, and imagine themselves in a more communicatively effective environment where ne-

gotiation of meaning is taking place. The reason would seem obvious: the goal of language teaching is or should be the enabling of students to express personal meanings. Certain researchers such as Long (1983) underscore the fact that a task needs to include negotiation of meaning in order to effectively propel language acquisition forward. So, it is argued, we should provide our learners with meaningful tasks which include plenty of opportunities for the negotiation of meaning.

Teacher and Students' Roles when Engaging in Task-Based Learning

Teacher and students' roles change within a task-based approach. TBL presents learning and teaching as collaborative work. Classes are student-centered. Teachers address students' needs and interests by becoming facilitators. According to Willis and Willis (2007), teachers who engage in Task-Based Learning promote real language use; when doing so, they become leaders and organizers of discussion, managers of group or pair work, motivators to engage students in performing a task and language experts to provide language feedback when needed. The main issues here are the degrees to which the teacher is responsible for content. The role of the students is far from being one of the passive recipients of comprehensible input; students are now seen to take the leading role in their own learning. Van den Branden (2006) agrees with the fact that task-based lessons are student-centered, which means students take the main part in the learning process. Learners are autonomous to negotiate course content or to choose linguistic forms when performing a task. Negotiation is done by providing options for the learners; for example, the teacher may suggest a series of topics and students decide which one to begin with. Learners are also group participants. Many of the tasks are done in pairs or groups which

will require adaptation for those students used to working individually or those used to whole class instruction. Another role for learners is the one of risk takers. Students constantly face challenges that involve the use of the target language. Students need to make the most of every opportunity to develop language while performing the task. Richards and Rodgers (2004) say that both teachers and learners in Task-Based Learning are responsible for the development of classroom interaction.

Task-Based Learning Models

There have been many task-based TBL models for class lessons. Ellis (2003) presented a model that focuses on meaning and real-world activities that demand learners to process language for real situations:

Table 1. A framework for designing task-based lessons (Ellis, 2003)

Pre-task (consciousness-raising activities)	Framing the activity (e.g. establishing the outcome of the task) Regulating planning time Doing a similar task
During task	Time pressure Regulating topic
Post-task (Focused communication activities)	Number of participants Learner report Repeat task Reflection

According to this model, English language development occurs when learners are given enough time to prepare and perform a task. There is some attention to form while communication takes place. Communicative tasks reflect three main approaches: consciousness-raising activities, focused communication activities and interpretation activities. As can be seen from Table 1, the pre-task shows students the grammar they will master in the future and form is engineered by the design of

the task. On the other hand, during task stage focuses on communication activities, which means performance is crucial. The way teachers handle error correction and how students react to the task are important. Teachers are expected to let communication flow and find strategies to make error correction in such a way that indirect focus on form is accomplished. Finally, students report to class. They may be exposed to any kind of input and then share with the group their understanding. Ellis' model also shows the conditions under which a task is performed (2003). He suggests a number of ways to regulate tasks: for example time pressure, which is regulated by the amount of time given to learners to perform the task. Familiarity with a topic also influences task performance. If a topic is relevant to students' own experiences, there are more chances of having engagement and intrinsic motivation.

Another task-based model was outlined by Willis (1996, p. 38), who used the format of Pre-Task, Task Cycle and Language Focus. This model will be used for the lesson plan exemplified in this paper (Table 2).

The table clearly shows three stages: pre-task, task cycle and language focus. During the pre-task stage the teacher identifies and introduces the topic and learners feel motivated to perform the task. The teacher recalls and activates existing knowledge by exploring the topic and highlighting useful words and phrases which might be needed during task performance. The second stage, task cycle, gives learners the opportunity to perform real world tasks with the teacher's monitoring. It is advisable to have students work in pairs or in small groups at this stage. Also, while planning, the teacher should provide all the necessary input by acting as a facilitator. Learners plan how to present the outcome of their work, generally by exchanging and comparing final products. Students

Table 2. Task-based lesson plan model (Willis, 1996, p. 38)

Pre-task		
Introduction to topic and tasks		
Teacher explores the topic with the class, highlights useful words and phrases. Learners may be exposed to examples.		
Task cycle		
Task	Planning	Report
Students do the task in pairs or small groups. Teacher monitors; mistakes do not matter.	Students prepare to report. Accuracy is important, so the teacher stands by and gives advice.	Students exchange or present report. Teacher listens and then comments.
Language focus		
Analysis	Practice	
Students examine then discuss.	Teacher conducts practice of new words.	

report the conclusions they have reached. The final stage, language focus, places emphasis on language features used during the two previous stages. The language focus provides opportunities for students to analyse and practice specific linguistic features arising from task. All in all, Task-Based Learning moves from fluency to accuracy and fluency again, which demonstrates that although form is important, it is not the central part of the task model.

Willis' (1996) three-stage task model does not clearly state the evaluation component. The teacher's monitoring during the task cycle is a kind of informal assessment since s/he provides indirect

feedback. However, we would suggest a four stage called Assessment as shown in Table 3.

Ellis (2003) considers different issues related to task assessment. One of the considerations is that tasks have to be meaningful and show how and what the learning is. We propose two kinds of assessment: first, formal assessment using rubrics and second, informal assessment using a self-evaluation format. Rubrics evaluate task performance. The rubric will consider sequence of tasks, group participation and outcome. The teacher will make this formal assessment by giving a score to each one of the important aspects when performing the task. Douglas (2000, as cited in Ellis, 2003, p. 289) considers target language use and task characteristics when assessing tasks. As a result, rubrics state the objective of the task, the procedures, the use of time for completing the task and the format, all aspects involving the use of a target language.

Another kind of assessment we propose is a self-assessment form which will provide students'

Table 3. Assessment stage Assessment

1. Students complete the Task Evaluation Form (see sample in Appendix 3).
2. The evaluation form considers previous stages and desired outcome.
3. Teacher uses a rubric to evaluate students' outcome.

feedback and attitudes towards the given task. This evaluation is done individually, even if students worked in pairs or groups. Appendix 3 shows an example of a self-assessment form in which students have the possibility to reflect on their own learning process before, during and after a specific task. The first aspect to consider is the “Goal” where students reflect upon their final understanding of the task. On the second aspect students analyze their performance during the task cycle. Following that, students choose what the best way to work is for them (individually, pair work or group work). On the fourth aspect, students think about their linguistic and functional learning, and finally, students have the opportunity to give their opinions, suggestions and recommendations based on the task developed. This validation tool guarantees the lesson plan has achieved a clear goal. Besides, the teacher will count on at least two kinds of evidence to validate the success or failure of the lesson. Nunan (2004, p. 6) states that “assessment/evaluation is concerned with the selection of assessment and evaluation instruments and procedures” in our specific case: rubrics and self-evaluation form as illustrated in Appendix 3.

It is advisable to adjust the form to the outcome of each one of the tasks. The form will have students assessing task performance and achievement. This evaluation form will provide insights about four different aspects: task goal, task performance, kind of interaction, language focus and future actions. The task goal is stated in terms of language use and functions. Also, it has students reflect if they truly reached the desired outcome. Task performance has students reflect on the strengths and weaknesses during the task cycle. Teachers may use this feedback to improve input and monitoring future tasks. Although TBL advocates cooperative learning, there are instances in which students might prefer to work on their own. By indicating the kind of interaction students prefer, teachers identify how

to plan future lessons: individually, in pairs or group work according to the students’ performances and interests. The language focus provides information on how students are doing in term of language and finally, future tasks give feedback on the how and what plan for upcoming task-based lessons. Ellis (2003) points out that self-assessment fosters students’ autonomy, and “can serve as a means of developing a reflective attitude in the learner and can stimulate goal setting” (p. 302). In this respect, English language development, which is seen more as a process than a product, will be supported by a component of formative formal and informal assessment. As Nunan (2004) states, it is not only important to “know that” but also “to know how”; the two proposed assessment instruments evaluate the “what” and the “how”.

Task-Based Lessons

Richards and Rodgers (2004) say that Task-Based Learning is an approach that uses tasks as the main unit for planning and instruction. Language is meaningful so that learners engage in tasks and thus learning takes place. The previous models show that a lesson could be a series of tasks or a task may be developed in more than one lesson, which means there may be multiple tasks or mini-tasks within the main task. Goals and objectives will be stated in terms of language use (functions) rather than linguistic forms. Lessons will be a sequence of different tasks, one related to the other, reaching a goal or outcome (Willis & Willis, 2007); all the communicative tasks are the vehicle of communication.

The best way to integrate a task-based approach is by going from topics to tasks. Topics are relevant to the students’ lives and make a sequence of different tasks feasible. In order to raise awareness, teachers can not merely choose a topic from the textbook, examination papers, or social contexts but can also ask pupils to suggest their own topics

Table 4. Taxonomy of task types in Willis and Willis (2007)

Task types	Examples of specific tasks
Listing	Brainstorming Fact-finding Games based on listing: quizzes, memory and guessing.
Ordering and sorting	Sequencing Ranking ordering Classifying
Comparing and contrasting	Games finding similarities and differences Graphic organizers
Problem-solving tasks	Logic problem prediction
Projects and creative tasks	Newspaper Posters Survey fantasy
Sharing personal experiences	Story telling Anecdotes Reminiscences
Matching	Words and phrases to pictures

from a list given by the teacher. When the topic has been chosen, teachers can set up different types of tasks which are classified according to cognitive processes (Table 4).

Willis and Willis (2007) say that “a good task not only generates interest and creates an acceptable degree of challenge, but also generates opportunities for learners to experience and activate as much language as possible” (p. 70). At this point it is necessary to distinguish among focus on meaning, focus on language and focus on form. The teacher begins by choosing a topic, narrows it down and designs the different kinds of tasks; while developing

the tasks there will be different language needs. Focus on language and form depends on how tasks are graded. Pupils begin with a simple task and during the task cycle perform more challenging cognitive and linguistic tasks. There will be different instances to focus on language and form; however, the main focus is on meaning since students want to achieve an outcome. Focus on language occurs when learners “pause their process for meaning and switch to thinking about the language itself” (Willis & Willis, 2007, p. 113). Learners are working independently with meaning and highlight any language they need to draw upon. For example, students look up

Table 5. Main differences between focusing on language and form (Willis & Willis, 2007, p. 114)

Focus on language	Focus on form
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students' initiative and needs. • Takes into account the context of the communicative activity. • Students explore what they need. • Student-centered. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teacher's initiative and need. • Outside the context of the communicative activity. • Teacher provides what students need. • Teacher-centered.

a word, choose the best expression or word, check sentences for accuracy or improve the main idea. Focus on form occurs when the teacher isolates a specific structure and explains it outside the context of the communicative activity (Willis & Willis, 2007, p. 114). Table 5 summarizes the main differences.

As can be seen, choosing, sequencing and implementing tasks will combine a focus on meaning and a focus on form. The lesson presented in Table

6 shows how learners go through a series of tasks in order to attain a final goal, which is to have a class celebration. Each one of the stages prepares learners for the next. The pre-task stage is the shortest in the cycle. The teacher will introduce the topic of celebrations and learners will activate previous learning and meaningful experiences. This stage creates interest since learners will share life experiences about celebrations. During the task

Table 6. Sample of a lesson

Lesson
Topic: *celebrations*

The following is an example of a task-based lesson having speaking development as one of its main purposes.
Time: 80 minutes
Level: High intermediate
Grade: Undergraduate students- although it may be used at any level
Task sequence:
 Task-based speaking
 This is a speaking lesson on the theme of organizing a celebration. Students, in groups, will plan a celebration.

Pre-task

Introduction to topic and tasks (10 min)
 Aim: To introduce the topic of celebrations and to give the class exposure to language related to them. It is important to highlight new words and phrases.
 Introduction to topic and tasks (10 min)
 Aim: To introduce the topic of celebrations and to give the class exposure to language related to them. It is important to highlight new words and phrases.
 Priming: Show students pictures of a celebration. For example, photographs of the family celebrating Christmas or someone's birthday.
 Tell how the celebration went. Use the pictures to provide as many details as possible.
 When you finish sharing your personal experience, distribute a card with the following questions and have students answer them:
 When was your last family celebration?
 Which are some of the special occasions you celebrate with family or friends?
 What is your favorite celebration with friends or family?
 What was the last celebration you had with your family or friends? How was it?
 What details make a celebration a success?
 Do you remember an especially happy celebration with friends or family? What happened?

Task cycle

Task (10 min)	Planning (40 min. Keep in mind the task involves writing) Tasks may take longer to prepare	Report (8 min. per group)
<p>Tell students, in groups of four, that they will plan a celebration including all aspects around it like invitation cards and/or a newspaper article to report all the facts about the celebration. Give some minutes to think it over. The groups discuss possibilities for a celebration, brainstorm vocabulary (e.g. kinds of celebrations, objects used for certain celebrations). Give rubrics at this point so students know how they will be assessed (see Appendix 1 for rubrics on this lesson). Teacher monitors and answers questions.</p>	<p>Students in groups plan the chosen celebration. For example, Christmas, Halloween, birthday, or 4th of July. (See Appendix 2: Task card which explains the process and requirements). Students prepare to report. It is advisable to check how roles and assignments are distributed within the group. Everybody needs to be involved. Accuracy is important, so the teacher stands by and provides feedback to each one of the groups. Homework is to be ready to report next class.</p>	<p>The classroom is divided. Each group is assigned a place in the classroom to decorate and provide the environment for their celebration. Students present, classmates listen and participate in their celebration. They can ask after the presentation. Teacher gives feedback on the content and quickly comments. Students vote and choose the best celebration.</p>

Language focus

Analysis (10 min)	Practice
<p>Write sentences given by students on the board. Highlight language you want to address. Students review phrases in context and take notes of the language they need.</p>	<p>Option A (in the classroom). Exit card: in pairs. Each student asks two questions about one of the celebrations. Option B (at home). Teacher assigns homework to practice new words or structures.</p>

Evaluation

Students complete the Task Evaluation Form (see Appendix 3 for Celebrations - Task Evaluation Form)
Teacher completes rubrics

phase students will make decisions based on their likes and needs. They will choose what celebration to organize and how to present it to the class. Each learner will be responsible for one aspect to make this celebration a success. Students may use their knowledge of the topic and language structures to accomplish the task; the teacher will act as a facilitator by providing feedback as needed.

When using the previous task-based lesson, learners are more motivated and engaged in the learning process. Learners make decisions according to their interest which ends in meaningful learning. For example, during the pre-task phase they talk about their own celebrations and ask about their classmate's which make them appropriate to learn with. Learners are more responsible for their own learning which will end in autonomy.

Although there is time for writing, students will be focused on speaking activities.

Conclusion

As a way of conclusion, Task-Based Learning offers more advantages than disadvantages. A TBL framework focuses on language acquisition and learning through different tasks that pursue a goal. When carrying out the tasks, learners do not concentrate on language features, but on reaching their goal. Learners are engaged in each one of the tasks since life experiences and previous knowledge support learning. Language is used in everyday life and accounts for students' interests.

Students are autonomous and teachers monitor and facilitate learning or language acquisition. Learners are given clear guidelines and make decisions on roles and how to present the final result. After the task completion, language should be analyzed. This analysis is done by using examples from the tasks performed. Students will be required to do some kind of practice in or outside the classroom. Since there are many kinds of tasks, classes are varied, which increases students' motivation. Finally, language is used for communication. However, the difficulties of following a Task-Based Learning approach lay in teachers' and students' attitudes. Practitioners need to be prepared to use language as a means not as an end. Also, teachers have to differentiate real tasks from mere class activities. This differentiation may take time, especially if one considers the fact that many class activities look like tasks; for instance, role plays. A role play is a task only if students have a clear goal and during the interaction there is a kind of negotiation of meaning. A role play is not a task if students only recite a part

of a conversation. There is only language learning if students are using language to reach their communicative purposes. The last criticism of a Task-Based approach is the apparent lack of focus on grammar. As has been stated and seen in the lesson plan provided, there is a focus on form; it is just not the main point and it is influenced by the students' needs. Task-Based Learning is a new style of having students perform goal-oriented activities which demand real purpose, sequence and grading. Task-Based Learning (TBL) is a new way of having students use the language according to their communication needs.

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Appendix 1: Rubrics for a Lesson about Celebrations

Name _____ Date _____

	Beginning 0-1	Developing 2	Accomplished 3	Exemplary 4
VISUAL - ART	Sloppy, used pencil/pen. Hard to see and/or read. Not very creative or appealing.	Project is somewhat neat, but needs work. Words are not easily read and more color is needed to catch the eye of the reader.	Project is very neat, but the organization is not as good as it could be. Words were readable and neat. Project is mostly creative and appealing.	The project is neat and orderly. There are many visuals and an excellent text for cards and newspaper articles. The information is easy to read. Everything is creative and appealing.
TASK DESIGN	Students did not plan any celebration.	Students are still planning their celebration.	Students planned most of the aspects of the celebration.	Students planned the celebration.
COVERAGE OF TOPIC (invitation card, newspaper article, party decor)	Includes few or none of the required aspects	Includes many of the required aspects	Includes most of the required aspects	Includes all required aspects
CLASS TIME	Did not use time to focus on the project or often distracted	Used some of the time well. There was some focus but occasionally distracted.	Used time well. Usually focused on project and never distracted.	Used time well. Always focused on project. Never asked to get to work.
PARTICIPATION AND PREPARATION	There is not any activity prepared.	Only a few members of the group participated. It was somewhat prepared, organized and creative.	Most of the students were involved. It was very organized, creative and prepared.	Everybody was involved in the activity. It was very organized, creative and prepared.

Appendix 2: Task Card with Processes and Requirements

TASK CARD:
CELEBRATIONS

INTRODUCTION

Do you like celebrations? What is your favorite celebration? How do people around the world celebrate major holidays? Now it is time to organize your own celebration for the class.

TASK

In groups you are going to organize your own celebration. Decide what you want to celebrate and invite your classmates to attend this magnificent event.

PROCEDURE

In groups decide the celebration you want to have (wedding, anniversary, Mother's Day, Father's Day, Saint Valentine's, New Year's, etc.).

Organize all the aspects to consider in order to make this celebration a success.

The following is a list you need to bear in mind when planning:

- a. Write an invitation.
- b. Write a newspaper article about the details.
- c. Organize an activity to do during the celebration.
- d. Bring and explain some décor and food. For example: Thanksgiving: Turkey and orange colors.

CONCLUSION

Vote for the best celebration.



Make a chart comparing and contrasting all the different celebrations.

Appendix 3: Task Evaluation Form (to Be Completed by Each Student)

Topic: *Celebrations*

Read the following sentences and check (√) yes, no or sometimes.

Read the following sentences and check (√) yes, no or sometimes.			
Aspect	Yes	No	Sometimes
1. Goal a. I reach the task outcome _____ b. I provide information about _____ c. I know all the aspects around _____ d. I ask and answer about _____ e. I understand all the information about a _____			
2. Task performance During the task cycle: a. I had problems with vocabulary b. I had difficulties understanding what my classmate was saying c. I had difficulty expressing my thoughts d. I forgot expressions related to _____ e. I was relaxed			
3. Interaction a. I liked working in groups b. I prefer working individually			
4. Language focus a. I used new vocabulary b. I used the grammar I needed c. My classmates provided language support when needed d. My teacher provided language support when needed e. I learned new grammar, vocabulary and/or expressions f. I had the right amount of time to do my task			
5. In the future a. I would like to be assigned similar tasks b. I would like to do a task having the same topic but different outcome c. I want to place emphasis on: Writing Speaking Vocabulary Reading Listening			