

Thinking tasks in the language classroom

*A Nordic-Baltic project pilots the use of thinking skills
in language teaching and learning*

Have you ever asked your learners to guess the number between 1–100 you are thinking of, in order to practise numbers in the foreign language? What would happen if you told them they have to find the answer in only six questions and you will only answer yes or no?

Our latent interest in ‘thinking’ in education was sparked after attending a week-long, Comenius-funded course in Latvia called ‘Thinking Skills in Language Education’. As a language teacher and a CLIL (Content and Language Intergrated Learning) primary teacher and teacher trainer, we expected an interesting course, giving us plenty of information about thinking and, hopefully, a few tips to use in the classroom. We got more than we bargained for!

That was in January 2009, and now we find ourselves in the middle of a Nordplus Project, ‘Bringing Creativity and Thinking Skills into the Education Process’ which began in October 2010 and will go on until September 2012. Twelve teachers from Finland, Latvia, Lithuania and Norway are now continually trying to implement Thinking Tasks, in the spirit of the Thinking Approach (TA), into their own classrooms, piloting the ‘Thinking Task Framework’ and reporting on their experiences, as well as taking part in workshops, seminars and open lessons. So what is the Thinking Approach? What’s a Thinking Task? What’s the Thinking Task Framework?

How can we teach thinking?

The thinking approach is a general approach to teaching thinking in education which combines teaching subjects with giving learners regular



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and systematic opportunities to develop their thinking and learning skills.

To do this we do not have to change our subject content so much as the way we approach it and offer it to our students. Taking part in this project has meant using Thinking Tasks as much as possible in the



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classroom and for us this has opened up new, rewarding and motivating ways of working.

Thinking tasks can be created from tasks we use already. We just have to ‘tweak’ the instructions and /or add limitations to the task to make it more challenging, so that the pupils (and possibly also the teacher) don’t immediately know the answer or how to find it. This is where thinking starts. The following tasks are some of the tasks we have done with grades 3 to 6 in the primary English and CLIL classroom in conjunction with our coursebooks and own materials, and for teacher training, but they

have been used elsewhere at all levels, from kindergarten to university, and practise many language skills. We have tried many types of tasks within our project, and these can be seen in our teaching diaries on our project website. Here we give you a taste of some familiar tasks which are fairly easy to turn into thinking tasks.

Games are a motivating way to practise and teach language and many common games can be ‘tweaked’, by slightly changing the instructions, to force our learners to think more.

The Thinking Approach is based on the Theory of Inventive Problem Solving (TRIZ) and has been developed particularly to suit the needs of foreign language learning and teaching by Dr Alexander Sokol and his colleagues. Along with mastering various aspects of language, students acquire models for thinking that help them cope with challenges and come up with novel solutions in problem situations. The ENV briefly described above is just one of these models but there

are many more. These models for thinking can be used to help our learners to gradually discover for themselves the systems underlying a language. This can have far-reaching effects for how we teach grammar and all other aspects of language. It encourages us to reformulate our aims in the classroom so that we use our material in a creative way to organize challenging tasks. Learning to resolve these challenges by creating and using models becomes central to our pupils’ work and will equip them for their future lives. The Thinking Task Framework is a set of clear guidelines being piloted and developed

within our project which will help teachers to plan thinking tasks successfully in the classroom.

Why should we do it?

Using thinking tasks in the classroom has meant doing less of the prescribed language coursework, but by keeping a keen eye on our aims, both immediate and long-term, we have more than covered the demands of the curriculum. There is a marked increase in the use of the foreign language in the classroom, and for natural, realistic situations, rather than for doing exercises and translating or checking meaning with rote questions. We can only describe to you here the tip of the iceberg.



We still do many things as before in the classroom, and this approach is not a quick-fix. Especially at the beginning, it demands a turn-around in the thinking of the teacher and a willingness to take risks. It provides a system where the various demands of the curriculum, including reflection, thinking skills, learning strategies, projects, portfolios and much

more become an integral and natural part of the teaching and learning of languages.

Thinking tasks have proven to be very rewarding for both the learners and the teachers, leading to increased motivation - more active pupil participation, curiosity about the subject and also curiosity as to how a difficult task can be dealt with. We realise that we have underestimated the capabilities of our learners and that, despite initial complaints, they derive great satisfaction through exceeding themselves in tasks which seemed too difficult. Weaker students, too, are satisfied at achieving more. They even comment, 'I liked this task because it was difficult.'

Thinking tasks - some samples

Group the following words and name the groups:

Instead of asking our pupils to group words under various given headings (eg animals, vehicles, adjectives etc), we asked the pupils to sort a bank of words into a certain number of groups. They themselves decided what the groups were and the reasoning behind them. Different answers were acceptable. The challenge was increased by asking them to make different groupings, and /or different numbers of groupings, with their reasoning, from the same bank. Anything can be sorted: words, sentences, characters, novels, pictures, objects, films, songs etc. By being asked to group a list of water plants in a CLIL science lesson pupils were forced to read and refer to their texts many times to gather the necessary information. This method can be used to find information and to practise reading all kinds of texts. If pupils have difficulty coming up with ideas this reassures the teacher that there is enough room for thinking in the task and a thinking model can then help them (see the next task for details).

This kind of task practises categorizing and the noticing of similarities and differences, and can be used to introduce new vocabulary, grammar or ideas, or to revise. Perhaps to introduce the imperfect you could ask learners to sort sentences which

include different past tenses, even before they know them, and they will have to examine the sentences carefully to notice how the verbs are formed and used. They might first look at the content of the sentences and sort them on that basis, which will also be acceptable, but they could then be asked to sort again on a different basis.

Yes/no games:

Someone thinks of an object, the others have to guess what it is, and questions can only be answered by saying yes or no. To make this a thinking game we can, for example, limit the number of questions allowed, so that the learners can no longer simply guess the answer and will have to eliminate as many objects as possible with each question. Additional possible answers are, 'Yes and No' and/or 'It's not important', as these are also informative.

Find a number between 1-100 in six questions

This generally stumped our pupils and after silence one or two gingerly came up with suggestions, 'Is it between 10 and 20?', 'Is it less than 50?', 'Is it more than...?', 'Is it an odd number?' By writing each question on the board, we were able to reflect afterwards on which were the best questions, which the worst, and why

they did or didn't achieve their aim. This reflection every time is important - sometimes it has to be gone through thoroughly, a question at a time; other times it's brief. Pupils quickly learned how to ask these strong, relevant questions in the foreign language, and also how to do this task well, and became annoyed at classmates who resorted to guessing. When the challenge became too easy, limitations had to be added - fewer questions, time limits, team competitions - pupils were often keen to think up limitations themselves.

Find the object in the classroom I am thinking of in 10 questions:

When the pupils had got to, or were clearly going beyond 10 questions, they realised they needed help with the task as guessing just wasn't enough, 'We can't do this!', 'It's too difficult/not possible!' At this point the so-called ENV model of things in the classroom was built up.

The ENV model

The ENV model, as shown on next page, is one of the tools for thinking within the Thinking Approach. It is based on the notion that to understand and solve problems inventively we need to be able to break down the problem. Just as a mechanic is able to take apart a car in order to find out how it works and what may be

wrong with it, our pupils can learn to 'take apart' the idea of any object, event, grammar point, text, problem – in fact anything at all – to be able to see more clearly what we are dealing with and how to cope with the challenge presented.

From the ENV model, the pupils had a tool whereby to think clearly about what the classroom consists of and to systematically ask questions which eliminated more alternatives, 'Is it a piece of furniture?', 'Is it on the floor?', 'Is it electrical equipment?' etc. Once they knew, for example, that it was a piece of electrical equipment, they had to think of the Values of that (computer, camera etc), and questions for narrowing them down. In terms of ENV they could choose the feature 'Location' and ask, 'Is it at the front of the room?', and depending on that answer, keep narrowing down the alternatives.

When the game had been played, and the questions noted, we reflected, not just on the outcome and on language matters, but also on the tool used (in this case ENV), on the questions and the reasons for success and failure, so that the next time they played better. They had to reflect on how ENV helped. Was there anything missing from it? Again, when the task became easier, the challenge had to be increased and so, for example, questions about a feature of the classroom which regularly seemed to help with quickly finding the answer were forbidden, and the next most important feature had to be found.

The Yes/No game can be played at any level to practise any language, from finding a country ('Is it large?' 'Is it in Asia?' etc) to much more difficult lateral thinking situations. It also gives excellent practice in speaking, forming questions, in all kinds of vocabulary, and in teamwork and listening skills. Through this game pupils practise the very important thinking skills of asking strong questions, learning to notice and eliminate irrelevancies as well as picking out essential facts and evaluating the models and processes used to complete a task, all within the context of the subject matter.

E
= **E**lement, ie the word, task, problem.
In this case, for example:
- *an object in the classroom*

N
= **N**ame of the features of the element
In this case, for example:-
furniture
clothing
people
equipment
location
colour
size etc

V
= **V**alue, or details about each of the features given.
In this case, for example:-
desks, chairs etc
jeans, jumpers, etc
girls, boys, teacher
computer, camera
at the front, on the floor
red
large, small

The ENV Model is one of the models for thinking that help students cope with challenges and come up with novel solutions in problem situations.

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The project Bringing Creativity and Thinking Skills in Educational Process has been developed with support from the Nordic Council of Ministers in the framework of the Nordplus Horizontal programme.

You can find detailed information about the course here:

www.ta-group.eu/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=86:course-1&catid=47:residential-courses&Itemid=81

For further information:

www.ta-teachers.eu Our Nordplus project open website - you can read our teaching diaries and find out more about bringing the thinking dimension into the educational process. Anyone interested is welcome to join the community.

www.thinking-approach.org Full of information about about the Thinking Approach to language teaching and learning, with much material which can be used in the classroom.

www.thinking-approach.eu A site for language learners, particularly suitable for upper secondary and above, and available for learning English, French, Latvian and Romanian along with developing one's thinking skills.

www.ta-group.eu A site of the TA Group, the educational company from Latvia coordinating our Nordic-Baltic project. Includes information about other thinking related projects in education and about residential courses for teachers you can attend with the support of European Community grants.