



Structuring learning through visual guidance

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describes how to make learning processes visible.

The following article explores how the activity board can be used to visually structure and manage complex communicative tasks, making them more approachable and effective for learners. After outlining the didactic foundation, the article introduces the tool, highlights its benefits and offers a detailed classroom example that demonstrates how the tool can be implemented in everyday teaching practice.

Structuring the learning process in a TBL context

The concept of Task-based Learning (TBL) has gained broad acceptance in English language teaching and continues to influence classroom practices around the world. Depending on the interpretation, TBL can take various forms, but a common principle lies at its heart: language learning is most effective when language is used to achieve meaningful and communicative goals. Rather than focusing on isolated grammar or vocabulary exercises, TBL engages learners in authentic communication and purposeful interaction – the kinds of skills they will

need beyond the classroom to master real-life scenarios.

In today's teaching landscape, the role of the language teacher has evolved beyond simply transmitting linguistic knowledge. Rather, we prepare learners to act with competence and confidence in a variety of real-life situations. This requires us to change how we design and structure our English lessons. Language learning becomes a reflective experience in which students explore, experiment, practise and express themselves through tasks reflecting everyday scenarios. These scenarios range from familiar situations, such as buying tickets, ordering food or asking for directions, to more complex and unpredictable challenges. Examples of these challenges include managing a misunderstanding at an airport, participating in a group discussion or creating a digital product, such as a podcast or travel blog, in a professional setting. These tasks are united by their authenticity; they mirror the kinds of communicative demands learners may encounter outside school and give purpose to the language being learnt.

However, while these tasks are engaging and relevant, they can also overwhelm learners, especially those who lack experience with independent, open or group-based learning. Without support or scaffolding, some learners may have difficulty navigating the various demands

of a task, such as: gathering suitable content; using appropriate language; working within a group; applying cultural knowledge; and knowing what to do next. This is why a structured learning process is essential.

Just because a task is open ended does not mean it is unstructured. In fact, the more open a task is, the clearer the process must be. Breaking a task down into clear, visible steps enables learners to focus on one aspect at a time, monitor their progress and experience a sense of accomplishment along the way. This is where the activity board becomes a valuable classroom tool. It is extremely helpful for visualising workflow and supporting time and group management. It turns complex learning sequences into manageable units (subtasks) and fosters learner autonomy without leaving learners on their own. In short, TBL works best when structure and freedom go hand in hand.

How to use an activity board

The main idea behind an activity board is to provide teachers and learners with an effective strategy for structuring complex learning tasks through visual scaffolding. Rather than overwhelming learners with the complexity of a real-life scenario task and potentially discouraging them, the teacher provides smaller, more manageable subtasks (see the teaching example).

The activity board consists of three columns (Figure 1), which form the visual foundation of the workflow. In the first column, To do, each subtask is placed to illustrate the upcoming workflow and the steps necessary to complete the task. The order of the subtasks is important and must be followed in sequence. However, depending on whether the learners work collaboratively or cooperatively, it is also possible to work on more than one subtask at a time, as long as they maintain a coherent structure. Once one or two subtasks are chosen, they are placed in the middle section: In process. This transparently visualises what learners are working on, how far along they are in the process, and what steps need to be followed afterwards. The third and final column, Done, presents subtasks that have been successfully completed by learners. Before completing the entire task, all subtasks from the To-do section are placed in the Done section again to indicate finished work.

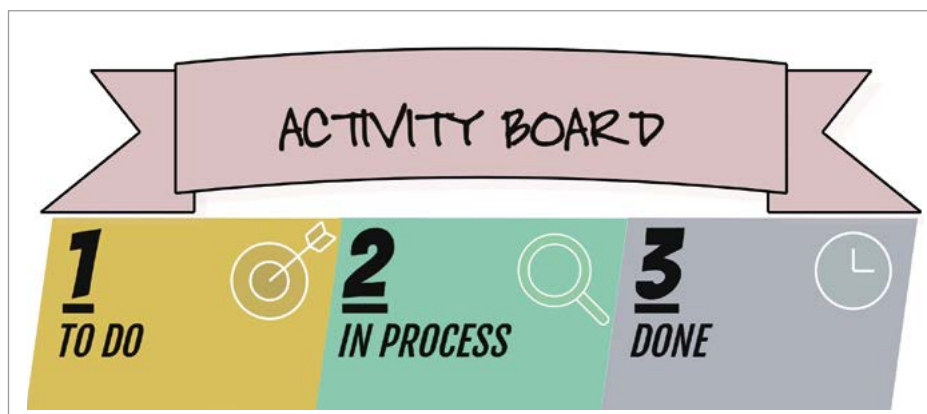


Figure 1: Layout of an activity board

<p>1. Understand the task → Read the task carefully and make sure you know what you have to produce (dialogue, poster, role play, video).</p>	<p>2. Collect ideas → Talk in your group and gather ideas or information about the topic.</p>	<p>3. Plan what to say → Decide what each person will say or do and write key phrases or notes.</p>
<p>4. Think about how to say it → Check your language: use helpful words, correct grammar and polite forms.</p>	<p>5. Create and practice → Create your product or practise your performance together.</p>	<p>6. Present and reflect → Present your result and reflect on what went well and what you could improve.</p>

Figure 2: General example of subtasks

To prepare the activity board, the teacher must consider several steps.

In **Step 1** – the teacher needs to be aware of all the steps that need to be taken in order to successfully accomplish the task. This lays the groundwork for creating the subtasks for the To-do section of the activity board.

- ✓ What product, performance or result should learners achieve?
- ✓ Which topic(s) should they research, explore or understand?
- ✓ Do they need background information or specific factual input?
- ✓ What vocabulary and grammar structures are essential?
- ✓ Which functional phrases or language chunks will support communication?
- ✓ Which skills are being practised?
- ✓ Will learners take notes, summarise, describe, present or negotiate?
- ✓ Does the task require intercultural awareness or knowledge of social conventions?
- ✓ What are the logical stages from beginning to end?
- ✓ Which steps can be completed individually, in pairs or in groups?

- ✓ Will learners use digital tools, graphic organisers, reference materials or templates?
- ✓ Do they need model texts, visuals or planning aids?
- ✓ What kind of scaffolding is necessary (sentence starters, word banks, checklists)?
- ✓ How much time will the task require?
- ✓ What criteria will be used for assessment (rubrics, success criteria)?

Although this may seem overwhelming, it is essential to break down complex tasks into smaller pieces. Thorough preparation will allow the teacher to observe more at a later point.

Step 2 – the aforementioned steps and questions will be broken down into manageable subtasks. The teacher should bear in mind not to show all subtasks randomly, but rather to provide a clear, structured order in which learners can work with them. Figure 2 provides a general example:

A more specific illustration is provided in the ‘Teaching example’ section, which is the fourth point.

Steps 1 and 2 must be prepared in advance. In more advanced classes, however, step two can be done with the class to encourage autonomy and participation.

In the **third step**, the teacher introduces the topic and task, and, depending on social considerations, forms groups. At this point, the actual lesson can start. The activity board then clarifies the expected outcome and breaks the task into visible steps. The activity board remains visible throughout the entire working process. As learners begin working, they move their subtasks through the board in either an analogue or digital way. In the analogue way, groups move the subtasks they have written down on sticky notes from one column to the next, reflecting their progress and revisiting unfinished parts. In the digital way, groups move digital cards (prepared by the teacher or digitally written down by the learners) on a digital board. This visual progression supports self-regulation and collaboration, especially in groupwork. It also allows the teacher to monitor progress without interrupting the learning process. After completing the task, learners reflect on their process. The activity board provides a visual record of their workflow, making it easier to discuss strategies, problems and learning outcomes.

Key benefits of using an activity board in TBL settings

There are five specific key benefits to applying the activity board.

- 1. Clarity through visual structure**
 Breaking down a complex task into manageable steps provides a transparent and visible learning process. This helps all learners, especially those who struggle with open-ended tasks, to stay focused and always oriented.
- 2. Promotion of learner autonomy and self-regulation**
 Making progress visible (To do – In process – Done) allows learners to take ownership of their work. They can decide when to move a subtask forward, fostering independence, time awareness and responsibility. In addition, the process encourages goal-oriented work and self-monitoring.
- 3. Effective role of the teacher as a facilitator and observer**
 With the task process clearly structured, the teacher can shift from direct instruction to observation and guidance. This frees up valuable time to monitor group dynamics, give targeted support and assess learning without interrupting the flow.
- 4. Formative assessment and feedback**
 The activity board provides an ongoing visual record of learner performance and engagement. Teachers can use this to give timely formative feedback and to assess not only the final product but also the learning process itself (collaboration, strategy and skill use, progress pacing).
- 5. Enhanced collaboration and communication in groups**
 The step-by-step design encourages meaningful interaction, as learners must coordinate who works on which subtask and how. This supports communicative competence, encourages negotiation of meaning and helps learners understand the value of teamwork, therefore increasing group accountability.

Teaching example: create a travel blog post

The following scenario has been chosen for the specific teaching example.

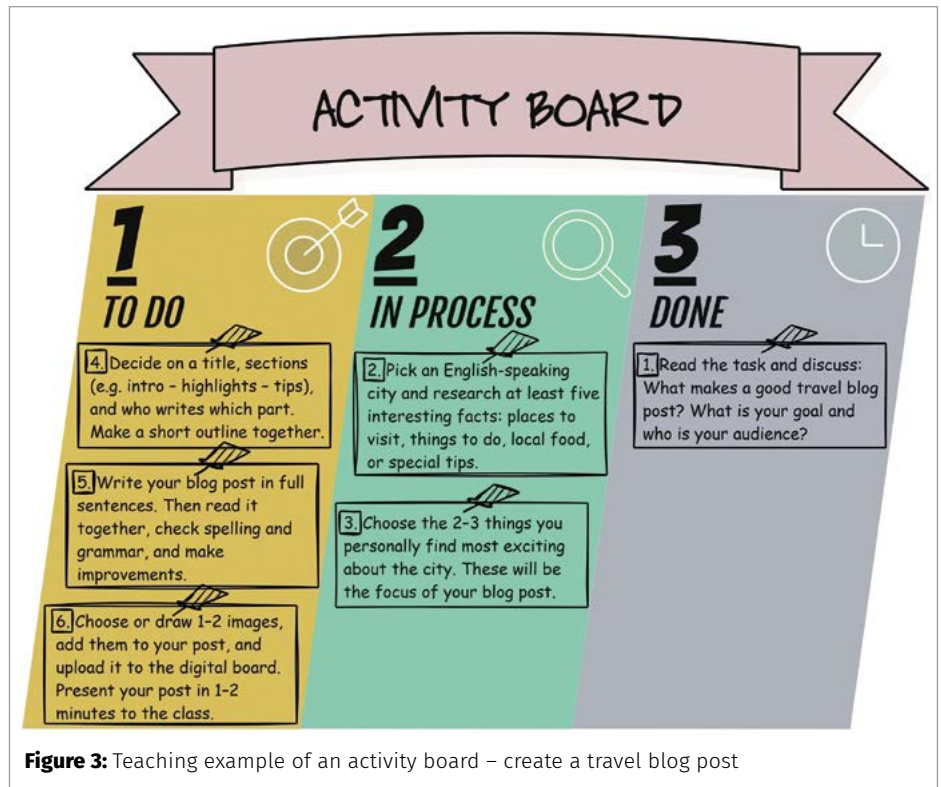


Figure 3: Teaching example of an activity board – create a travel blog post

You are travel bloggers working for an international youth travel website. Your task is to write a 150–200-word blog post about an English-speaking city to help young travellers decide where to go. Include personal highlights, useful tips and a few fun facts. The post will either be published on a digital class platform or presented orally.

The teacher breaks the complex task into six manageable subtasks and places them in the To-do column of the activity board. These steps must be completed in order. Learners work in small groups and move one card at a time from To do to In process and finally to Done. All of the subtasks will be presented directly in the activity board (Figure 3).

The scenario is authentic and motivating, allowing for real communicative output. The activity board organises the workflow, encourages collaboration and helps manage time. Teachers can observe and guide the process while collecting evidence for formative assessment.

Conclusion

The activity board takes the learning process and structure to a new level. Due to its continued visibility, overview

of task progression and process orientation, learners have the chance to focus on mastering communicative and authentic tasks in a TBL setting. The activity board also enables teachers to break down real-life scenario tasks into meaningful and manageable subtasks, fostering learner autonomy, collaboration, group management and reflection. By making the steps of a task visible (To do, In process and Done), the activity board provides clarity and direction. Learners know what to do, when to do it, and how far they have come. Teachers, on the other hand, benefit from greater freedom to observe, coach and formatively assess learners without interrupting their workflow.



Martin Bastkowski has over 15 years of teaching experience in primary and secondary schools in Germany, Ireland and the USA. He is currently a teacher, head of the foreign

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