

Task-Based Language Learning: Methodology and Sample Lesson Plan

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Abstract: Language teachers in India continue to struggle with effective development and successful implementation of a task-based lesson. The current paper presents a template for teachers to frame and execute language tasks to achieve desired outcomes. The paper begins with a brief discussion of tasks, and then follows a discussion on three-tier task-based learning framework, model and lesson. A teaching unit/ sample lesson is also included to illustrate the method. The sample lesson presented was developed for elementary stage students studying in schools of India. The developed plan focused on vocabulary and structures needed to make reservations in different paid establishments. Any task-based lesson primarily includes pedagogical tasks that mirror the real-world tasks. Owing to its usability outside the boundaries of the classroom, a task-based lesson becomes more meaningful and apropos to students. Such basic lesson can be used as a model to teach relevant vocabulary and sentence structures pertaining to other real world tasks including talking about clothes and fashion, calling customer care for help, other telephonic conversations etc.

Keywords: Task-Based Language Learning (TBLL) Definitions, Framework, Lesson Plan, Elementary School Students, Language Skills, and Vocabulary Building.

INTRODUCTION

Task-based language teaching (TBLT), an offshoot of communicative language teaching (CLT), emerged as a reaction against traditional itemized form-based methodology of teaching second language. Since then, continued theory building and an ever-increasing body of empirical research have brought this method to its full maturity [1]. TBLT, now, has become the catchword in English teaching circle [2]. The major reason for this attention is the desire of educators to promote 'language-that-matters' over dissecting the language into bits assuming that it will lead to its holistic acquisition. Another reason for such inclination is the fact that massive amount of researches conducted in the area of second language acquisition (SLA) advocate better language learning when students are not focused on linguistic forms [3].

At its most basic, task-based language teaching rejects the notion that language can be learnt independently of its application and embraces instead the value of learning by doing or experiential learning [4 cited in 5]. In Dewey's terms, principal elements around which instruction should be built are activities worthwhile their own sake, and it is by engaging learners in doing valued activities that relevant declarative and procedural knowledge is developed,

learners are motivated to engage with instructional content, and learners develop deep linkages between what they learn and how that learning can be put to use beyond the classroom [6]. TBLT qualifies all the demands of Dewey's experiential learning as tasks used in the classroom act as motivator that allows the students to make connections between language, its meaning, its form and the situations in which they are used. And once they have experienced these linkages in class, it becomes easier for the learners to use them outside it [7].

The idea that language learning should revolve around tasks began in 1980s in Bangalore, India stemming from a professional debate on effectiveness of CLT [8]. N. S. Prabhu, the proponent of this approach, advocated that traditional formal instructions emphasizing fluency and accuracy were not only unprofitable but also potentially harmful [9]. The major finding of this project was that learners do not need form-focused instruction for the acquisition of grammar [10] and also that to achieve an acceptable level of competency in target language impetus should be placed on exposing to and interacting in that language [11]. In its very essence, TBLT sets specific tasks for students so that they act as if they were using language

in real life; this further provides a better context for the activation of learning processes [12].

TBLT can be understood in terms of Krahnke [13] who advocated that it utilizes activities that learners might have to perform for non-instructional purposes as opportunities for language learning. In TBLT, language, per se, is not taught, but is learnt as needed for the completion of task. According to Krahnke, the strategy behind this approach involves an attempt to compel students to apply higher order thinking skills to a combination of new and old information [cited in 14]. According to this definition, learners use their existing language repertoire to achieve the task goals. They express their thoughts even if some of the language is inaccurate and errors are viewed not as evidence of poor learning but as a part of learning process [15]. Furthermore, TBLT offers learners a room to negotiate meaning in order to solve a problem [16]. Negotiation involves adjustment, rephrasing and experimenting with language, which are central for communication in real life conversations [17].

What are Tasks?

Despite the fact that TBLT is gaining momentum, with many books having been written about it from various aspects of ELT, there is no real consensus amongst the experts about what constitutes the most vital element of TBLT: the 'task' [18]. Task has been defined in various ways in the literature. Different researchers and practitioners have given their own definition of what they call task. For instance, some have called almost any classroom activity – a task. Breen [19] states that task is, therefore, assumed to refer to a range of work plans which have the overall purpose of facilitating language learning – from the brief and simple exercise type to more complex and lengthy activities such as group problem-solving or simulations and decision-making. This definition doesn't clarify how task is different from any exercises carried in classroom and includes anything that happens in a language classroom hence, is an unfocused and loose definition of what a task is. The same scholar in 1989 [20] provided a more comprehensive definition of task and described task as a structured plan for the provision of opportunities for the refinement of knowledge and capabilities entailed in a new language and its use during communication.' Breen specifically states that a 'task' can be a 'brief practice exercise' or 'a more complex work-plan that requires spontaneous communication of meaning.' Breen here conceptualizes task in three phases – task-as-work plan (intended pedagogy), task-in-process (actual pedagogy), and task-as-outcome (what is actually produced) [21]. Prabhu, [22] defines a task as an activity that requires learners to arrive at an outcome from given information through some process of thought, and which allows teachers to control and regulate that process. This definition however, takes the autonomy of the learner in building

his own path of learning [23]. Nunan [24] defines 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 principally focused on meaning rather than form". According to this definition, students will use their prior knowledge to achieve their goal and if any new information will be needed, teacher will act as a facilitator and provide required information to ensure smooth learning process. Bachman & Palmer [25] defines a task as an activity that involves individuals in using language for the purpose of achieving a particular goal or outcome in a particular situation. This definition is broader as it encompasses tasks specifically designed for assessment and instruction as well as real-world activities [26]. Willis [27] is another figure who contributes to the use of tasks in language classroom. She advocates "tasks are always activities where the target language is used by the learner for a communicative purpose (goal) in order to achieve an outcome." Furthermore, Willis presents a TBL approach where tasks are used as the main focus of the lesson within a supportive framework. She holds that "the aim of tasks is to create a real purpose for language use and to provide a natural context for language study." The most comprehensive definition of task, however, was proposed by Skehan [28] who points "a task is an activity in which meaning is primary; there is some sort of relationship to the real world; task completion has some priority; and the assessment of task performance is in terms of outcome." With regard to differing definitions of what constitutes a task, Nunan [29] concludes all scholars seem to agree that tasks involve communicative language use, where the learners' focus is on meaning rather than grammatical forms and that tasks are designed to facilitate students' participation in meaningful activities [3].

For the purpose of present research, tasks were operationally defined as goal-oriented, meaning-focused, authentic activities that involved real world communication and were designed to facilitate students' participation in meaningful activities. It was presumed that language proficiency would be achieved by doing the tasks.

Task-Based Learning and Teaching Model

Various researchers [27, 30, 31, 32] have proposed varied task-based models for lesson development. Although recommendations of various researchers have some differences amongst each other, common thread ties them all together which includes focus on authentic language and assessment to be based on task outcome which is further defined as the appropriate completion of tasks and not on accuracy of language forms [33]. The one used in the present research was proposed and outlined by Willis [27]. According to this model any task-based lesson can be divided into three principal phases – pre-task, task cycle

and language focus.

During the pre-task phase the teacher introduces the task and topic to the learners. It is at this stage that the students are exposed to vital vocabulary, phrases, words and structures that might be needed for task performance and completion. The teacher is expected to be well equipped for the language acquisition to take place.

The second stage, referred to as the task cycle, is completely communicative and student-centered. It gives learners the opportunity to get on the stage and perform real world tasks under expert supervision [3]. Task-cycle is further divided into three stages – doing the task, planning and reporting. At the first stage viz. doing the task stage it is advisable to have learners work in pairs or groups to achieve the goals of the task. At the planning stage, the teacher is expected to provide all the necessary input for target language acquisition. Learners then plan their reports effectively. They also plan on how to present the outcome of their work. At the final stage of this phase, the learners report their findings to the whole class.

The final phase is language focus, which places emphasis on language features used during previous stages – pre-task and task cycle [3]. During this stage the focus moves towards accuracy and henceforth, the teacher corrects all linguistic mistakes and weak arguments that occurred during the lesson. Language focus is also categorized into two components – analysis and practice. Both the components provide opportunities to the learners to analyze and practice those linguistic features that originate from the task and also discuss any vocabulary or grammar that did not naturally come up in the course of the lesson [34]. The language focus stage ends with controlled practice, where students are required to use target language accurately. It is advised that practice exercises should be given in form of writing exercises as the opportunities for language focus is increased if learners are asked to put their ideas in writing [35].

Task-Based Lessons

The principal component around which any task-based lesson revolves is the ‘task’ [12]. There can be a series of tasks in a single lesson or a single task may be developed in more than one lesson [3]. The tasks chosen for a language lesson can be academic or non-academic [36]. Non-academic tasks include buying and selling tickets, making reservations, going on a shopping trip or calling customer service for help [37]. Academic tasks could be writing a term paper or completing reports [13]. Whether academic or non-academic any task is further subdivided into 6 components – goals, input, activities, teacher’s and learner’s role and lastly, settings [24].

Goals represent the intention behind any learning task, these tell what will be the outcome of the task hence describes both teacher’s and learner’s behavior. For example, one of the goals of a task-based lesson can be ‘to develop student’s confidence in speaking’ or ‘to develop student’s writing skills’. Input refers to the data that form the point of departure for the task [38]. Many scholars viz. [39-43] have advocated the usage of authentic input in the task. They support such topics that are relevant to the students’ lives and hence suggest choosing a topic from social contexts or textbook or even asking pupils to propose topics of their own choice [3]. Proponents of authentic materials advocate that learners are motivated to do such tasks because life experiences and previous knowledge aid and support learning. For example, McGrath [44] underscores the use of authentic material in the classroom as they help learners replicate the communicative behaviors that they will require in real world [cited in 42].

Activities specify what learners will actually do with the input [45]. Willis & Willis [46] suggest, “a good task not only creates an acceptable degree of challenge, but also generates opportunities for learners to experience and activate as much language as possible.” A paradigm shift is witnessed in the roles of teachers as well as students. Teaching and learning are no longer seen as two separate entities but as a collaborative work. A task-based class is mostly student centric and hence learner takes up the central role in classroom setting. He is the one who negotiates course contents, chooses forms and vocabulary, discusses various options for completing the task and, evaluates task outcomes [47, 48]. It is also worth mentioning that a student-dominated classroom doesn’t put teacher at the backstage. In a task-based lesson teacher is no longer a passive implementer of other people’s syllabus and methods but an active creator of her own materials and activities [45]. Willis & Willis [46] advocated that role of a teacher in a task-based lesson is multifarious – sometimes as a leader she promotes real language use, sometimes she becomes an organizer of discussions, at other times she assumes the role of a manager wherein she manages group or pair work, she also motivates students to engage in meaningful language learning and finally as a language expert she provides feedback when needed. In short, neither does a teacher take a back seat nor is she the driver of the whole lesson but is an essential figure in successful implementation of any plan. The final component of any task-based lesson is setting which refers to the arrangements specified in the task. Settings are different for individual, pair and group tasks. Similarly, settings also vary depending on whether the task will be carried partly or wholly outside the classroom.

The advantages of task-based lesson can easily be inferred from the above paragraphs such as a task-

based lesson offers prospects of natural learning inside the classroom [49]; it is intrinsically motivating [50 cited in 51] because proficiency is not given much importance in the beginning and hence every student becomes an active participant in the lesson [52] and uses his/her language repertoire freely without any fear of being wrong or ridiculed at [27]. Additionally, a task-based lesson is student-centric – the language explored arises from students' needs [53] and these needs further dictate what will be covered in the lesson (rather than decision made by teacher or course-book). Moreover, since this approach is compatible with learner-centered educational philosophy [31] hence it is suitable for students of all ages and backgrounds [54]. Although task-based pedagogy is very effective in improving the communication skills of students, it is not without its critics. One of the major criticisms faced by this approach is its apparent focus on meaning and vocabulary building and negligence towards grammatical forms [55]. Beretta & Davies [56] found that with task-based language learning students performed poorly on grammatical tests and showed signs of fossilization. However, Rodriguez-Bonces & Rodriguez-Bonces [3] mention that in task-based lesson there are different instances to focus on language form and meaning. Focus on form occurs when learners' pause their process for meaning and switch to thinking about the language itself [46].

Synoptically, we can say that task-based learning helps students by placing them in real-life situations, where oral communication is essential for doing a specific task. This method has the advantage of

getting students to use their skills at their current level, developing language through its use. The focus is away from learning language items in a non-contextualized vacuum to using language as a vehicle for authentic, real-world needs. By working towards task realization, the language is used immediately in the real-world context of the learner, making learning authentic. It has the advantage of placing the students' focus toward achieving a goal where language becomes a tool, and making the use of language a necessity.

TBLT in Action

The current lesson was developed for VII graders studying in elementary schools of Ambala, India. English is taught as second language in India and is taught for at least one school period (approximately 50 minutes) every weekday. A regular language class, in India, follows traditional teacher-centered instructions following Grammar-Translation (GT) approach [57]. This approach offers very little room for interaction [58] and has been criticized because of its limited scope [59]. The lesson presented in the current paper offers the experience of spontaneous interaction [27] wherein the focus is on building meaning and not just using language for display purposes and henceforth brings teaching from abstract knowledge to real world application. The dual goals of this lesson were to teach vocabulary pertaining to making reservations and to improve speaking skills of elementary school students. The lesson can be used as a template to teach relevant vocabulary and structures related to shopping, talking about fashion, talking to customer service representatives etc.

Sample Lesson Plan (Appendix A)

The present section describes a lesson plan that demonstrates how task-based language teaching can be used in an actual language classroom. The lesson plan was designed to teach vocabulary required while making reservations at various paid establishments to elementary school students.

Topic: Making reservations

Time: 120 minutes

Grade: Elementary school students – although this lesson can be used at any level

Aim: The following is an example of a task-based lesson having speaking development as one its main purposes.

Overview of the task: This task was used to teach the expressions for making reservations at hotels and restaurants. First the learners were familiarized with types of paid establishments and differences between these. Then, they learnt required phrases and vocabulary needed to make reservations. The task used interactive situational dialogues to communicate vocabulary to students.

Materials required: Task worksheet (one copy per student), general stationery, audio apparatus, LCD projector, projector screen, white board markers, green and red flags, picture dictionary, pre-recorded videos related to making reservations, reservation form, cue cards, stopwatch for timer.

Pre-task

Introduction to topic and task (20 minutes)

Aim: To introduce the topic of ‘making reservations’ and to provide vocabulary pertaining to the same.

Priming: For priming, students were shown pictures of paid establishments and their key characteristics were discussed with them. A discussion of differences between the types of establishments was also mandated. Initially, the teacher discussed her visit to these establishments – this helped in reinforcing the newly exposed vocabulary. Once the teacher finished sharing her personal experience, she asked students about their visit and experiences at these places. The basic amenities available in the paid establishments were also discussed. Relevant vocabulary was provided if students were unsure about a particular amenity.

Task-cycle

Task: Students were allowed to sit in pairs and were told that they will learn expressions for making reservations at paid establishments. They were given ample time to brainstorm questions that they might need to ask a receptionist while reserving a room. They were also reminded to include questions related to services and amenities available at the establishments. Once this exercise was done, the learners were asked to swap roles and think of those questions that they might need to ask the guest as a receptionist. This task was followed by a guided writing task in which the learners were provided with a cue card (reservation form) containing relevant information and they were asked to write a dialogue that might have occurred between guest and the receptionist. After giving ample training and exposure using videos, brainstorming and gap-filling tasks the teacher then moved to unguided writing where students were provided with different scenarios on which they were required to produce dialogues and enact it in class. Students were given rubrics at this point so that they know how they were going to be assessed. At this stage teacher monitored students' progress and answered any questions or queries that students had.

Planning: Students wrote, planned and collected materials that they needed for enacting role-plays on chosen situation. The teacher checked how the roles and dialogues were distributed within the participants. Accuracy was important at this stage so the teacher provided necessary feedback to each pair.

Report: Each pair was given 10 minutes to set up the environment and present their dialogues to the whole class. While the presenters presented, classmates listened and jotted down any questions or queries that they had. Teacher provided feedback on the content and delivery. Students' feedback was also encouraged. Finally students chose the best pair.

Language focus

Analysis: Teacher wrote the sentences provided by the students on whiteboard and highlighted the language that she wanted to discuss. Students reviewed the phrases and took notes of the language that they need while making reservations.

Practice: Teacher assigned homework to students to practice newly learnt vocabulary and phrases.

Evaluation

The task was successful in more ways than one; in addition to learning vocabulary pertaining making reservations and facilities available at the paid establishments, the learners also became more confident as they were successfully able to apply their knowledge to simulate as well as real life situations. The keener ones were able incorporate many words that they have picked from their day-to-day experience and the weaker ones accumulated all the vocabulary they could. Many students reported that writing dialogues was challenging but at the same time interesting as well. All in all, students liked the topic as well as the tasks owing to their informative value and interactivity offered.

DISCUSSION OF LESSON PLAN

A task-based lesson was designed to present a real world situation to students that they encounter in their day-to-day routine. Students were expected to work individually, in pairs as well as in groups for successful completion of tasks. In a way, lesson used the notions of assimilation and accommodation as advocated in Piaget's cognitive development theory. Assimilation, which is using the existing schema to a new situation [60], was equivalent to using existing repertoire of language to new and novel tasks i.e. the lexical items and ready-made chunks of prevailing language contributed in acquisition of fluency, accuracy and complexity. Accommodation, on the other hand, happens when new experiences cannot be explained with existing schema [61] and hence, needs to be changed to take in new information; this in current lesson can be linked to accommodating new words and structures, which in turn denotes restructuring the present knowledge with higher level thinking. Enough room, freedom and time were offered to students to

assimilate, accommodate, discuss and explore language that they will need for successful completion of task. The task aimed at developing all four language skills with a particular emphasis on honing speaking skills of students.

CONCLUSION

After successfully executing the lesson in two different schools of Ambala, the researchers observed positive outcomes in terms of vocabulary acquisition, raised confidence and motivation, improved attitude towards learning second language as well as better team spirit. The students also reported that TB lessons gulped the gap between the classroom and the world outside it. The lesson plan presented here is quite elaborate to be used as such in different settings however, this is not a fixed model; teachers have the flexibility to modify, revise or transform it to suit the requirements of variegated learning environments.

The results of the present research aims at convincing the curriculum framers, textbook writers and other concerned authorities to promote further research in the area. More lesson plans should be developed and shared with the language instructors so that they can use these as a base to plan and devise their own lesson plans. The implications of the study further partially stretch to move the wheel towards a more developed teaching education program. It is recommended that a continuous professional development program should be provided to in-service and pre-service language teachers. The aim of this program should be to offer necessary exposure to knowledge and practices in task-based approach. Teachers should be given training in TB theoretical framework; its implementation; designing and devising novel tasks; potential risks and difficulties involved in the implementation of the approach; and finally the ways to overcome these hurdles.

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Appendix A

Lesson Plan: Making Reservations

Overview of the task:

This task teaches students expressions for making reservations at hotels and restaurants. First they will be familiarized with types of paid establishments and differences between these. Then, they will learn the required phrases and vocabulary needed to make reservations. The task uses interactive situational dialogues to communicate vocabulary to students.

Aim of the task:

- To teach to the students' expressions, vocabulary and phrases needed to make reservations
- To make students confident using English in real situations

Instructional Objectives:

Learners will be able to:

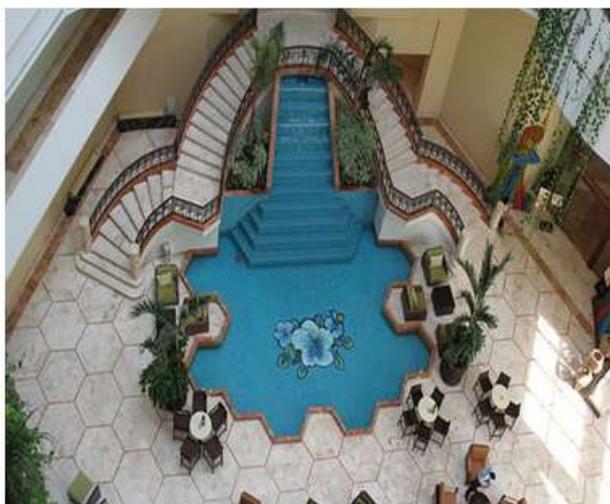
- 1.1 know, understand and recall the meanings of popular paid establishments
- 1.2 recall the basic amenities available at a hotel
- 1.3 remember, understand and identify appropriate phrases, sentence structure and vocabulary related to making reservations
- 1.4 participate productively in pairs and groups during writing and speaking tasks
- 1.5 integrate learnt material logically in an oral presentation
- 1.6 demonstrate efficient word choice, vocabulary, sentence structures and grammatical accuracy to convey meaning in written as well as oral work
- 1.7 plan, develop and modify their writing using language learning strategies for all language skills
- 1.8 perform role play in front of audience
- 1.9 apply learnt vocabulary in simulated as well as real life situations

Materials Required:

Task worksheet (one copy per student), general stationery, audio apparatus, LCD projector, projector screen, white board markers, green and red flags, picture dictionary, pre-recorded videos related to making reservations, reservation form, cue cards, stopwatch for timer.

Pre-Task

I. Look at the picture dictionary below. It describes various kinds of paid establishments along with their key characteristics. Vocabulary pertaining to making reservations at these establishments is also provided. Work in pairs and discuss whether you have been to these places. Where did you go and what did you like the most there?



“**Hotel**” refers to an establishment that provides paid lodging, for a short duration to tourists. Hotels provide a number of other services such as a restaurant, a swimming pool, pub etc.



“**Motel**” is derived from the term “motorists hotel.” These are usually situated on highways and are normally less expensive than hotels because these provide less guest comfort.



“**Resort**” is a place where people go for vacations or recreation. Such establishments provide for most of a vacationer’s wants such as food, drinks, lodging, sports, entertainment and shopping.



Front Desk: Registration and reception desk in a hotel or organization.



Check In



Check Out



A **suite** offers multiple rooms, with more space and furniture than a standard hotel room. In addition to bedroom a suite included a living room, dining room, kitchenette etc.



Kitchenettes are very commonly found in hotels and suites. It usually consists of a small refrigerator, a microwave oven, a coffeemaker, a refrigerator and a sink.



Vending Machine



Bellboy

II. Certain pictures related to basic amenities provided in a paid establishment will be displayed for 15 seconds on the projector. You need to remember as many amenities (facilities) as possible. Once the projector goes off you need to write as many amenities as you remember in the space provided. One correct answer gets one point; the one with maximum number of answers wins the task.





Task Cycle

1. Group Exercise - Suppose you want to reserve a room at the hotel. Think of the questions you need to ask the receptionist before you decide to stay at the hotel and reserve a room.
2. Suppose you work at the front-desk at a hotel. Think of the questions you need to ask the guest before reserving a room for him.
3. Watch the following videos and listen to the dialogue carefully. Identify the key questions that you need to make as a customer and as the receptionist. Pen down these questions on your notepad.
4. Stacy filled the hotel reservation form while talking to Mr. Michael Bright. Look at the form and think of the dialogue that might have occurred between the two. Also ask about the basic amenities that could be needed during the stay.

Hotel Grand Plaza <u>Guest Reservation Form</u>	
Name: <u>Michael Bright</u>	Date: <u>4th September 2018</u>
Phone Number: <u>6718935</u>	
Date of Arrival: <u>14th September 2018</u>	
Time of Arrival: <u>11:00 am</u>	
Date of Departure: <u>21st September 2018</u>	
Room Size: <input type="checkbox"/> Double <input type="checkbox"/> Single <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Suite <input type="checkbox"/> Business Suite	
Mode of Payment: <input type="checkbox"/> Mastercard <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Visa	

Recall all the exercises of pre-task and task cycle and try to produce dialogues on the following situations:

- You decided to go to Goa for a vacation of three days. Call at the front desk of Hotel Grand Woodward and ask for the types of room available, charges and basic amenities available. Book a suitable room and make the payment by credit card.
- You have reached Hotel Grand Woodward. Write a dialogue you have had on checking-in.
- You got to know that there are various sightseeing places in Goa. You decided to start for it early morning. Call at the reception and say that you need a wake-up call for 0600AM.

Language focus

Analysis: Let's discuss the important vocabulary, structure and sentences that we learnt from the lesson (*teacher writes the sentences provided by the students on whiteboard and highlights the language that she wants to discuss. Students review the phrases and take notes of the language that they need while making reservations*).

Practice: Write a conversation about hotels and staying in hotels, decide on the details and people involved in the dialogue. Try to use as much of the 'making reservations' vocabulary as you can.