



Task-based language teaching

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Abstract

English plays a crucial role in India. It is the associate official language of India. It still remains the only language that links people from different states. People still hesitate to speak English due to lack of confidence and practice. Methods of teaching English has changed with the times. From 'Translation Method' to the new student-centric approach, language teaching has seen a major shift. Now, the focus is more on using the language than just learning it. The utility value has given birth to one such teaching approach – Task-based Language Teaching / Learning. This paper tries to highlight the importance of communication to gain mastery over the language used and also the advantages of Task-based Language Teaching for learners whose mother tongue is not English.

Keywords: Task-based language teaching, task, communication.

1. Introduction

In order to fully acquire language, it must have real meaning by being used in natural contexts. Required areas of learning language: listening, speaking, reading, writing, vocabulary & grammar. Teaching English as a second language has a great responsibility on the teachers. Every effort by the teacher is to make the learners learn the foreign language as natural as possible.

Change in the goal of teaching English in an EFL (English as a foreign language) or ESL (English as a second language) context. English as a second language refers to specialized approaches to language teaching designed for those whose primary language is not English.

There are two key changes:

- 1) To produce fully competent English-knowing bilinguals rather than imitating native speakers.
- 2) English is not viewed as an end in itself but as a means to learn content such as Science & Maths (ie. Content & Language Integrated Learning)

Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT), focuses on the use of authentic language and on asking students to do meaningful tasks using the target language. Task-based language learning has its origins in Communicative Language Teaching (According to CLT, the goal of language education is the ability to communicate in the target language) and is a subcategory of it. It focuses on the final task to be done. It is based on the idea that you learn a language by using it, rather than by studying its

different components in isolation.

2. Definition of task

The term, 'task' was earlier known as 'communicative activity'. It has been defined differently by different scholars. Prabhu (1987) defines 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.

According to Willis (1996) tasks are activities in which the target language is used for a communicative purpose to achieve an outcome.

Activity that requires learners to use language, with emphasis on meaning, to attain an objective.

While the definitions may vary, emphasize is on the fact that a task is an activity that requires language learners to use language through a communicative purpose to achieve a goal where meaning is the major focus rather than form.

3. Difference between task and activity

'Task' and 'activity' are words that seem to be similar. But there is a difference between them. While the term 'task' means 'a piece of work to be undertaken or done', 'activity', on the other hand, means 'some event or some happening'. A task, thus, can be said to be any activity that is done with a particular purpose.

4. Origin of task-based language teaching

The concept of TBLT was first introduced by Prabhu (1987) in

his Bangalore Project in which he focused on communication, by engaging learners in doing “task”. Prabhu headed a project in schools in South India in which learners were simply presented with a series of problems and information/opinion gap activities which were solved under teacher guidance through the medium of English. Prabhu argued that a focus on language form actually inhibited language learning. He believed that learners might learn more efficiently when the focus of their minds is more on the task rather than on the language they are using. Language development was seen as the outcome of natural processes. TBL tasks motivate student involvement and lead to significant improvements regarding their language performance. In task-based language teaching, the central role is taken by the student, where he is given a fair share of freedom and responsibility in negotiating course content, choosing linguistic forms from his own linguistic repertoire while performing the task, discussing various options for task performance and evaluating task outcomes. It creates a real purpose for language use and provides a natural context for language study.

Tasks are a central component of task-based language teaching in language classrooms because they provide a context that activates learning processes and promotes second language acquisition.

5. Types of task

According to N.S. Prabhu (1987), there are three main categories of tasks: information-gap, reasoning-gap, and opinion-gap.

1) Information-gap activity: involves a transfer of given information from one person to another – or from one form to another, or from one place to another – generally calling for the decoding or encoding of information from or into language. Example: 1) in a group each member has a part of the total information (for example an incomplete picture) and attempts to convey it verbally to the other. 2) Completing a tabular representation with information available in a given piece of text. 3) Asking each other for directions 4) describing the activities of a company, etc

2) Reasoning-gap activity: involves deriving some new information from given information through processes of inference, deduction, practical reasoning, or a perception of relationships or patterns. Rather than exchanging information, the learners must collaborate, speculate and come to a conclusion. Example 1) working out a teacher's timetable on the basis of given class timetables. 2) Deciding what course of action is best (for example cheapest or quickest) for a given purpose and within given constraints. 3) planning a holiday with a given budget, etc.

3) Opinion-gap activity: involves identifying and articulating a personal preference, feeling, or attitude in response to a given situation. This is especially useful for more proficient language users who discuss a topic in more depth. For lower levels, asking open ended questions give them a chance to express their opinions. In opinion gap activities, there is no right or wrong answer. Example 1) story completion; 2) taking part in the discussion of a social issue, etc.

6. Stages in task-based teaching

In a task based lesson, the lesson is based around the completion of a task and the language used to complete it. The lesson follows the following steps:

1) Pre-task

The teacher introduces the topic and gives the students clear instructions on what they are supposed to do at the task stage. The teacher helps the students to recall some language that may be useful for the task. The pre-task stage guides the students in showing the way to complete a task. This gives the students a clear picture of what is expected from them. The students can take notes and spend time preparing for the task.

2) Task

During this stage, the students complete a task in pairs or groups. They complete the task using the language resources that they have. The teacher monitors, helps, guides and offers encouragement whenever needed.

3) Planning

After completion of the task, students prepare a short oral or written report to tell the class what happened during their task. First they practise what they are going to say in their respective groups. Meanwhile the teacher is available for the students to assist them. The students can ask for advice to clear up any language queries they may have.

4) Report

After the practice, students then finally report back to the class orally or read the written report. The teacher listens carefully and gives the students some quick feedback on the content.

5) Analysis

After the students finish reporting, the teacher then highlights relevant parts from the text of the recording for the students to analyse. The teacher can also highlight the language that the students used during the report phase for analysis.

6) Practice

Finally, the teacher selects language areas to practice based upon the needs of the students and what emerged from the task and report phases. The students then do practice activities to increase their confidence and make a note of useful language.

In education, a task refers to an activity where communication is necessary: for example- deciding something, solving a problem, designing or organizing something, or telling someone to do something. Tasks are meaningful outcome, so that the teacher and students know whether or not the communication has been successful.

In a task-based approach, learners learn by doing. Task activities are usually rich in language, involving a wide variety of language areas, as well as all the skills; reading, writing, listening and speaking. In task-based learning, a lesson or unit is designed to help learners to complete a task, for example; write a letter or report, talk to someone over the phone, make a reservation, plan a trip, and collaborate to design something, or hold a meeting.

Learner's curiosity is aroused when tasks interest them, which in turn induces them to participate. The attitude of second and foreign language teachers towards teaching methodologies and classroom techniques have changed. Student centered practical

and flexible approaches have been adopted to enhance student's capabilities. The learner personally explores the language so that he could find out how the language works and thereby enrich and extend his knowledge of the language with the help of the teachers. Skehan (1996) ^[6] argued that learners do not simply acquire language when they are exposed to it.

7. Advantages of TBLT

TBL approach has an advantage over more traditional approach (Present, Practice, and Produce). Task-based learning benefits students because it is more student-centered and improves the communicative skills of the students.

Willis (1996) identifies eight advantages in using TBLT:

1. To give learner's confidence in trying out whatever language they know.
2. To give learners experience of spontaneous interaction.
3. To give learners the chance to benefit from noticing how others express similar meanings.
4. To give learners chances for negotiating turns to speak.
5. To engage learners in using language purposefully and cooperatively.
6. To make learners participate in a complete interaction, not just one-off sentences.
7. To give learners chances to try out communication strategies.
8. To develop learners confidence that they can achieve communicative goal.

In oral tasks, learners use whatever language they have in order to convey a message or communicate (Willis, 1996).

Thus, participation in a discussion task provides different communication roles for learners, such as initiating questions and/or commenting on others opinions. Engaging in such tasks may affect learners motivation positively, as they actively take part in an appealing environment and one in which they are responsible for their own learning (Willis, 1996). Task feedback in the form of rewards (e.g. praise and encouragement) may influence learners motivation.

8. Conclusion

Task-based language teaching and learning is an important approach in teaching English for second language learners. This method fosters meaningful communication and is student-centered. It provides opportunities to actively participate in activities to achieve an outcome or complete a task. The learners complete purposeful tasks that elicit the use of the target language for communication. This, in turn, develops their confidence and fluency in using English. It also provides practical skill building and when the learners are motivated they show improvement in their language proficiency.

9. References

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