EFFECTIVENESS OF TASK-BASED LANGUAGE TEACHING IN DEVELOPING THE COMMUNICATIVE SKILLS OF STUDENTS

1ANNE DORATHY,

1Assistant Professor of English, Department of Humanities, Bannari Amman Institute of Technology, Sathyamangalam – 638401, Tamilnadu, India
1dorathy29anne@gmail.com

Abstract

Language learning enables a person to gain skills in reading, comprehending, writing, speaking, presenting, conversing, interacting and brainstorming. There are numerous theories and approaches to teaching a language, but all have one thing in common – a desire to make the acquisition of a foreign or second language as efficient and effective as possible. Effectiveness of learning a language will come into force when one learns the language fluently with confidence and clarity, reflecting one’s personality. Task Based Language Teaching (TBLT) is a methodology which offers students material which they have to actively engage in order to achieve an outcome or complete a task. This paper attempts to establish the effectiveness and advantages of task-based language teaching in developing the communicative skills of the students. TBLT represents an attempt to harness natural processes and to provide language focus activities based on consciousness-raising. Motivating the learners’ and make them perform better has always been the primary concern of language teachers. Learners’ curiosity is aroused when tasks interest them, which in turn induces them to participate. This paper also discusses how tasks may be an influential factor affecting learners’ motivation.

Keywords: TBLT (Task-Based Language Teaching), Language learning, Task, Motivation.
Introduction

English in India is increasingly being perceived as a very important language. It is the major language of trade and commerce, news and information, higher education and research in the world of globalization. “English is not only important in getting a better job, it is everywhere in social interaction. If you can’t speak it then you are nobody” (Scrase, 2004)[1]. It is quite evident that English occupies a prestigious place in India. India has a longer exposure to English than any other country in the world.

India has been directly and indirectly influenced by English language in fields, such as education, medical science, etc. Text materials relating to the subjects of science, engineering and technology and medicine are available only in English. Moreover, there is no single language to unite the people in whole country. Several languages are spoken in India and people are very reluctant to learn one common Indian language. Considering the above facts, learning English, the universal language, as a Second Language, becomes imperative in Indian education system (Murali, 2009)[2]. The continuously-growing interest in the study of English has led to the expansion of the domain of English Language Teaching (ELT), mainly concerned with the teaching of general English.

English Language Teaching in India

The teaching of English in India as a second language has been widely accepted from the beginning. The phrase English as a Second Language (ESL) was first used in the 1920s in Bangladesh, in regard to a second language as having a useful and practical role. English is included as a compulsory subject in the curriculum of Indian schools, colleges and universities. In India, English serves as a linguistic bridge between people from different linguistic backgrounds. The use of English oral communication at the work place is rated
as the most critical skill lacking among the graduates of higher education institutions because English is the most important language of communication in the multinational companies across India. Therefore, English language learning in India has become almost indispensable even for the rural learners.

**Language learning**

Language learning styles and strategies are the main factors that determine how well the students learn a second or foreign language. The attitude of second and foreign language teachers towards teaching methodologies and classroom techniques have changed. The early teacher centred, lecture-based and structural-syllabus instructions have become more student centred nowadays with practical and flexible approaches. The educational system has to prepare the students to be proficient in the target language so that they could communicate effectively and face the competitive world with confidence.

Since learning a language is a life-long process, it would help the learner to personally explore the language so that he could find out how the language works and thereby enrich and extend his knowledge of the language. With this perspective of language awareness, another aspect – the applied perspective should be added. This helps the learners to effectively explore, internalize and gain greater understanding of the language with the help of the teachers.

As Pennycook observes,

> When English becomes the first choice as a second language, when it is the language in which so much is written and in which so much of the visual media occur, it is constantly pushing other languages out of the way, curtailing their usage in both qualitative and quantitative terms ... With English taking up such an important position in many educational systems around the world, it has
become one of the most powerful means of inclusion into or exclusion from further education, employment or social positions. (Pennycook, 1994)[3]

Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research shows that language learning is mostly determined by the internal process of the learner. Skehan (1996)[4] argued that learners do not simply acquire language when they are exposed to it. However, the exposure may be “orchestrated” by the teacher. Learning is considered to be promoted by activating acquisition processes in learners and thus requires an approach to second language learning and teaching that provides a context that activates these processes. According to Richards and Rodgers (2001)[5], tasks are believed to promote the process of negotiation, modification, rephrasing and experimentation that are at the heart of second language learning.

Language Teaching Methodologies

Language teaching in the twentieth century is characterized by frequent change and innovation. The quest for better methods was a preoccupation of many teachers and applied linguists throughout the twentieth century. Much of the impetus for change in approaches to language teaching came about from changes in teaching methods. Many of the seeds which have grown into present-day methodology were sown in debates between more or less formal attitudes to language, and crucially, the place of the students’ first language in the classroom. The methods for English-language teaching which emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, including community language learning, the Silent Way, Suggestopaedia, the Berlitz Method, Grammar Translation Method and Audiolingualism are in no way beneficial to the students in the present scenario where the majority of students are desperate to learn English only to be communicatively competent
New ideas about teaching a foreign language have been brought to the forefront in recent decades, the most important being the use of a variety of activities inside the language classroom to enhance the communication skills of the students. Patterns of interaction in classroom vary from place to place, influenced by local educational norms, and also from time to time, as methodological fashions come and go. The level and age of the class also makes difference; the purpose of the current learning activity is another influence on interaction patterns (Lynch & Maclean, 2000)[6].

In this scenario, Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) has gained popularity among the language teachers and researchers. The term TBLT was framed and developed by second language acquisition researchers and language educators, largely in reaction to the teacher dominated, lecture-based classroom practices. The introduction of task-based approach is connected to the ‘Bangalore Project’ by Prabhu initiated in 1979 and completed in 1984. Prabhu says, a strongly felt pedagogic intuition, arising from experience generally but made concrete in the course of professional debate in India. This was that the development of competence in second language requires no systematization of language inputs or maximization of planned practice, but rather the creation of conditions in which learners engage in an effort to cope with communication. (Prabhu, 1987)[7].

**Task-Based Language Teaching**

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), also called Task-Based Instruction (TBI), is a famous and mostly researched area in the field of language pedagogy and second language acquisition since 1980s. Task-Based language teaching focuses on the use of authentic language through meaningful tasks. This method fosters meaningful communication and is student centred. Students are encouraged to use language creatively and spontaneously through
tasks. 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. Language development was seen as the outcome of natural processes. Evaluation of this project (Beretta and Davies 1985)[8] suggests that Prabhu’s learners were more successful than their counterparts who were taught in a more traditional way.

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) is an approach which offers students the opportunity to actively participate in activities to achieve an outcome or complete a task. The tasks that are performed everyday such as writing a letter or report or talking to someone over the phone, TBLT seeks to develop students’ inter language through providing a task and then using language to solve it (Skehan, 1998) [9]. Moreover, it enhances their learning, since TBL tasks motivate student involvement and lead to significant improvements regarding their language performance. In task-supported teaching, tasks are seen as tools to be exploited by teacher and learners in the service of particular language aims and objectives, with the teacher providing support through briefing, online support and selective feedback (Samuda and Bygate, 2008) [10].

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 (Breen & Candlin, 1980[11]). Task-based teaching that combines the best insights from communicative language teaching, offers a
change from the traditional method which learners may have failed to learn to communicate. 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. As a result, in a task-based approach, the cognitive demands placed on the learner will be one of the factors determining task complexity (Robinson, 2001)[12].

**Definition of Task**

From the 1980s to now, many definitions of task have been offered in the literature by the researchers from different research perspectives.

A task is a piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing, or interacting in the target language while their attention is focused on mobilizing their grammatical knowledge in order to express meaning, and in which the intention is to convey meaning rather than to manipulate form. The task should also have a sense of completeness, being able to stand along as a communicative act in its own right. (Nunan, 2004) [13].

A task is (1) a classroom activity or exercise that has (a) an objective attainable only by the interaction among participants, (b) a mechanism for structuring and sequencing interaction, and (c) a focus on meaning exchange; (2) a language learning endeavour that requires learners to comprehend, manipulate, and/or produce the target language as they perform some set of work plans. (Lee, 1999)[14].
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.

Breen (1987)[15] contributes to the definition of tasks in language classrooms, pointing out that a task is a structured plan to provide opportunities for the refinement of knowledge and capabilities entailed in a new language, which are subsequently used during communication.

According to Willis (1996)[16], tasks are activities in which the target language is used for a communicative purpose to achieve an outcome. Ellis (2003)[17] defines the tasks as activities that are primarily focused on meaning. In contrast, exercises are activities that are primarily focused on form.

According to Bygate, Skehan and Swain (2001)[18], a task is an 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.

Advantages of Task-Based Language Teaching

- Task-based learning is useful in shifting the focus of the learning process from the teacher to the student.
- It gives the student a different way of understanding language as a tool instead of as a specific goal.
- It brings teaching from abstract knowledge to real world application.
- A task is helpful in meeting the immediate needs of the learners
and provides a framework for creating interesting activities to address the students’ needs.

Willis (1996) identifies eight advantages in using TBLT:

1. To give learners 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 goals

Traditional Classroom and TBLT Classroom (Nunan, 2005)[19]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Traditional form-focused pedagogy</th>
<th>TBLT classroom</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rigid discourse structure</td>
<td>Flexible discourse structure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher controls topic development</td>
<td>Students are able to control topic development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The teacher regulates turn-taking</td>
<td>Turn-taking is regulated by the same rules</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The teacher knows the answer</td>
<td>‘The teacher does not know the answer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students’ role of responding and performing language functions is</td>
<td>Students’ initiate, respond and perform a wide range of language</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
limited functions

Little negotiate meaning More negotiate meaning
Scaffolding to enable students to say what they want to say
Form-focused feedback Content-focused feedback
Echoing Repetition

Types of Tasks

Prabhu (1987) divides meaning focused tasks into three categories as follows:

1. Information gap activity: It involves transferring of given information from one person to another or from one form to another.
2. Reasoning gap activity: It involves deriving some new information through processes of inference, deduction, practical reasoning, perception of relationships or patterns.
3. Opinion gap activity: It involves identifying, and articulating a personal preference, feeling, or attitude in response to a given situation.

Candlin (1987)[20] offers four types of language learning tasks as follows:

1. learner training,
2. information-sharing,
3. researching and experimentation
4. learning strategy training.

Richards & Rodgers (2001)[21] recommends the types of tasks as follows:

1. Jigsaw tasks: These tasks involve learners in combining different pieces of information to form a whole.
2. Information gap: Tasks in which one student or group of students has one set of information and the another student or group has complementary set of information. They must negotiate and find out what the other party's information is in order to complete an activity.

3. Problem solving tasks: Students are given a problem and a set of information. They must arrive at a solution to the problem. There is generally a single resolution of the outcome.

4. Decision making tasks: Students are given a problem for which there are a number of possible outcomes and they must choose one through negotiation.

5. Opinion exchange tasks: Learners engage in discussion and exchange of ideas. They do not need to reach agreement.

Skehan and Foster (1997)[22] and Foster and Skehan (1996)[23] showed that different task types can differ in their impact: some led to more accurate and fluent but less complex language, others produced more complex and accurate language, while yet others generated more complex but less accurate language. Linguistic complexity seemed affected by the cognitive complexity of the tasks.

Willis (1996) categorizes tasks into six types as follows:

1. Listing: Includes brainstorming and fact-finding, the outcome is a completed list or draft mind map. This type of task can help train students' comprehension and induction ability.

2. Ordering and Sorting: Includes sequencing, ranking and classifying, the outcome is a set of information ordered and sorted according to specific criteria. These types foster comprehension, logic and reasoning ability.

3. Comparing: This type of task includes matching, finding similarities or differences. The outcome can be appropriately matched or assembled items. This type of task enhances students' ability of differentiation.
4. Problem Solving: This type of task includes analyzing real situations, reasoning and decision-making. The outcome involves solutions to the problem, which can then be evaluated. These tasks help promote students' reasoning and decision-making abilities.

5. Sharing Experience: These types of tasks include narrating, describing, exploring and explaining attitudes, opinions and reactions. The outcome is usually social. These tasks help students to share and exchange their knowledge and experience.

6. Creative tasks: These include brainstorming, fact finding, ordering, sorting and comparing. Students cultivate their comprehensive problem-solving abilities as well as their reasoning and analyzing abilities.

Literature Review - TBLT

Task-based learning has gone through numerous modifications in recent years and has been recommended as a way forward in Communicative Language Teaching (CLT).

Lochana and Deb (2006)[24] confirmed the findings of Tanasarnsane's (2002)[25] research and Willis’s principles of task-based learning that gives students the opportunities to use language creatively. Further, task-based learning enhances the language proficiency of the learners.

The effectiveness of task-based learning is again confirmed by the study of Arumporn in Thailand. The researcher worked with MattayomSuksa IV students in Angthaya province investigating how task-based learning supported students’ speaking skill. The findings proved that task-based learning positively affected students’ speaking ability.
Rattanawong (2004)[26] identified the effects of teaching English through the task-based learning approach with the study conducted for PrathomSuksa learners. The results showed that the experimental group learnt the four language skills, reading, writing, speaking and listening better than the control group.

Bugler and Hunt (2002)[27] studied how tasks can be used as a basis for teaching and gave detailed report on a twelve-week long task-based learning project. The findings of their study showed that learners who participated in the task-based project found the experience to be motivating, intrinsically interesting and educationally beneficial.

Nunan (2004) in his study based on interviews with teachers, teacher educators, and ministry officials, suggested that TBLT emerged as a central concept from a study of curriculum guidelines and syllabi in the Asia-Pacific countries including Japan, Vietnam, China, Hong Kong, Korea and Malaysia.

Lopez (2004)[28] adopted task-based instructions over presentation-practice-production (PPP) approach for teaching English in two classes in a private school in the south of Brazil. He found that students learned English through task more effectively because they were using the language to do things to access information, solve problems and to talk about personal experiences.

Suxiang (2007)[29] explored the effects of combining task-based language teaching with online English language teaching on Chinese University non-major English graduate students. The results of the study proved that the students’ interest gradually increased and stimulated their potential ability in learning English, particularly the LSRW skills.
Al Nashash (2006)[30] investigated the effect of a task-based program for developing the productive skills of the first-year secondary grade female students’ at a secondary school in Amman. The results showed that task-based language teaching through the designed programme based on the procedures and principles of TBLT improved the productive skills of the students better than the conventional method of teaching.

Aljarf (2007)[31] investigated the effect of TBLT on 52 female EFL students at the College of Language at King Saud University, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. The students were given activities through TBLT and were pre and post-tested. The students spoke fluently using correct grammar and pronunciations and could easily generate ideas.

Birjandi and Ahangari (2008)[32] examined the effects of task repetition and task type on fluency, accuracy, and complexity on 120 students. The results and the analysis of variance indicated that task repetition and task type, as well as the interaction between these variables, resulted in significant differences in the students’ oral communication in terms of fluency, accuracy and complexity.

Narita (2008)[33] conducted a research in an elementary school in Japan where English was taught as a foreign language. The students were assigned with activities in which they were exposed to realistic communicative situations such as shopping tasks and interview tasks. The results showed that the students were highly motivated and had a strong desire to continue to study English in future after completing the tasks.

**Task-Based Language Teaching and Motivation**

Increasing the learners’ motivation and making them perform has always been the primary concern of language teachers. Each learner has a unique aim
and characteristics, many of which have an unavoidable affect in the way they approach the project of learning a second language. Even when their aims and purposes are the same, learners may take different pathways to reach those goals because of their own unique constellation of individual characteristics. Task content as it relates to the real world may be an influential factor affecting learners’ motivation. The effect occurs when learners find the tasks pertinent to their goals, needs and wants. Learners’ curiosity is aroused when tasks interest them, which in turn induces them to participate.

In oral tasks, learners use whatever language they have in order to convey a message or communicate (Willis, 1996). Their focus is mainly on meaning, which mirrors real-world activities, rather than on linguistic codes. Thus, allowing and encouraging learners to speak freely may affect their motivation positively by supporting the development of their confidence in using the language. 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).

Long (1990)[34] analyses tasks as either one-way or two-way, the two way task being the more motivating as it includes exchange of information and negotiation of meaning. Task feedback in the form of rewards (e.g. praise and encouragement) may influence learners’ motivation. In task-based learning, teacher feedback should be informative, helping learners to feel more competent and self-determinant. Another important idea to keep in mind is that in cooperative learning situations, feedback is readily available to students from their group members. In order to succeed, students need feedback so that they know how to study and use appropriate learning strategies.
Lochana and Deb's (2006) & Balamurugan.E, Jagadeesan.A (2018) project in a school run by the Basaveshwara Education Society in India also proved that task-based approach supports language teaching and learning. An experiment was developed in which non-task-based textbook activities were converted into task-based ones in order to test two hypotheses: (1) Task-based teaching enhances the language proficiency of the learners (2) Tasks encourage learners to participate more in the learning processes. Their findings suggested that TBLT is not only beneficial to learners in enhancing their language proficiency but also motivated them in language learning.

Choy & Troudi (2006)[36] studied the change in perceptions of and attitude towards learning English in a Malaysian college. The study focused on investigating the change in attitude towards learning English. The instruments used in the study were weekly student journals and student interviews. The results revealed that there was a change in students’ attitude from the time that they were in the secondary school to the time they were at the college. Students had a positive attitude when they were at the college because of the environment that encouraged them to use English for communication and learning.

Conclusion

Task-based language teaching and learning represents an important approach in teaching English for communication. Since language use is facilitative of reaching all kinds of goals in the real world, task-based language teaching naturally evokes a wide diversity of cognitive operations that learners need to perform in order to function in real life. TBLT provides opportunities to learners to use the target language in the classroom in order to develop their confidence and fluency in using English. Tasks help foster processes of negotiation, modification, rephrasing and experimentation that are at the heart of second language learning. Engaging learners in task-based activities provides a
better context for the activation of learning processes and hence ultimately provides better opportunities for language learning.

Learners spent a lot of time communicating during the task. Tasks also improved learners’ motivation and therefore promoted learning. The relationship between communicative ability and a person’s personality depends on each other. It is evident that with sufficient motivation, exposure and opportunity to use the language, the students’ could exhibit improvement in their language proficiency. Task-based language teaching is an effective methodology for incorporating the three learning conditions, exposure, use and motivation inside the classroom. Teachers can use it as a pedagogical tool to develop learners’ proficiency in English so that they are equipped with the essential skill to succeed, both academically, professionally and personally.

References:


25. Tanasarnsanee, M 2015, '3Ps, Task-based Learning and the Japanese Learner'.

26. Rattanawong, C 2004, 'Effects of Teaching by using Task-based Learning towards English Language Communicative Ability of Pratomsuksa six Students'.


29. Suxiang, Y 2007, 'A Study of Task-based Language Teaching on Online English Language Teaching'.


31. Aljarf, R 2007, 'From reticence to fluency: The effect of TBLT on students' speaking ability', International Association for Task-Based Language Teaching (IATBLT) vzw.


