

Task-based Learning: An Effective Approach in English Language Teaching

Mukesh Soni, Lecturer in English

Dayananda Sagar College of Arts, Science & Commerce, Bangalore

mukeshenglish@gmail.com

Diwakar Yadav, Lecturer in English

St. Joseph's College, Bangalore

ace.excellence@gmail.com

Abstract:

Teaching through task or in Willis' words "an activity which involves the use of language but in which the focus is on the outcome of the activity rather than on the language used to achieve that outcome" can create favorable learning conditions for the English language learners. Research has shown how tasks can improve the learning process of language skills. Among the recent effective approaches in ELT, Task-based Language Teaching, also known as Task-based Instruction has become an important approach. This paper focuses the implications of Task-based learning approach in English language teaching.

Key words: language skills, Task-based learning, approach, Task-based Instruction

Introduction:

Language is the life and soul of communication. Communication should be the goal set to achieve main objectives of English language teaching. To face the competition in the job market, it's essential that every student should be trained to acquire the basic level of competence in the usage of English language in his personal and professional life. Innovative and effective approaches are employed by the English language teachers and trainers. One method that has gained extensive acceptance and mobility is TBL or Task Based Learning. It is more student-oriented and practical approach compared to Text-Based Learning.

What is task?:

Williams and Burden (1997:168) claims that A task is any activity that learners engage in to process of learning a language. N.S. Prabhu , 1987:24 emphasized that it's an activity which required learners to arrive at an outcome from given information through some process of thought and which allowed teachers to control and regulate that process was regarded as a

task. 'Task' is defined by Willis (1996) as an activity where the target language is used by learners for a communicative goal in order to achieve an outcome.

Task-based Language Teaching:

Task Based Language Teaching (TBLT) is an approach which offers students to actively engage in communication in order to achieve a goal or complete a task using language. It was first developed by N.S. Prabhu in Bangalore, Southern India. According to Prabhu students may learn more efficiently when they focus more on task than the language they are using. TBLT enables learning process through task which learners have to perform or a problem they have to solve. (Harmer, J. The practice of English Language Teaching, 2007:71).

In English language classroom

- Tasks should be related to students' real-life language needs.
- Tasks create opportunities for focusing on form.
- Tasks develop students' intrinsic motivation.
- This approach enables teachers to see if students are developing the ability to communicate in an L2.

Types of learning and teaching activities:

There are many types of tasks. As N.S.Prabhu has mentioned in his Bangalore Project (1987) three types of tasks : 1) information gap 2) reasoning gap, and 3) opinion gap.

Information-gap activity: This 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. For example, activities like pair work for an incomplete picture, completing a tabular representation with information available in the text-book / work-book. Selection of related information is important in this activity.

Reasoning gap: This activity involves extracting some new information from given information through processes of inference, reasoning, or a perception of relationships or patterns. A teacher's time-table and class timetables can have given as a task. The activity necessarily involves comprehending and conveying information.

Opinion-gap activity: This activity involves identifying and articulating a personal preference, feeling, or attitude in response to a given situation. Activities like story completion, discussion on social issues, debate or group discussion can have done. Such activities require factual information and formulating arguments to justify one's opinion. But the opinion-gap activity does not have particular procedure to justify the results as right or wrong, and we cannot expect the same result from different individual or on different occasions.

Willis (1996) has listed some types of TBL tasks which can be implemented. They are:

a. **listing:** in this task, learner's prior knowledge on the topic is employed. As a result of this a list of concepts may be developed.

b. **ranking items:** students rank their most important work duties where the target language is required. The result of this activity may be the information stored according to specific criteria.

c. **comparing or contrasting items:** Students may make comparisons between different layers of the atmosphere. A group discussion activity may be done at the higher level. The outcome of this activity may be the identification of similarities and differences.

d. **problem-solving activities:** Here, students are told to find the common problems at work place and give the solutions. It develops the skill of finding the solutions.

e. **creative tasks:** Such activities are challenging as they require sound preparation and integration of skills. these challenging activities require a higher level of preparation and integration of skills.

In such tasks learner's role can be defined as group participant, monitor or risk-taker or innovator. On the other hand, teacher's role can be defined as selector and sequencer of tasks, preparing learners for task.

As far as the Indian classroom is concerned, the level of the students and the environment; topics that the learners can relate to; aims to be achieved and most importantly task design should be taken in mind. Task should be practical in approach, develop the LSRW skills, and learner centered.

Some topics can be considered as sports, cinema, games, hobbies, holidays etc.

TBL should involve practical tasks or projects that relate to real life situations which students can relate to without much difficulty. For example, interview, dialogue writing and presentation, reports, role play, creative writing, projects on different themes.

The Framework for TBL Instruction:

The most extensively worked-out framework is that of Jane Willis, who has proposed in her masterpiece ‘A Framework for Task-Based Learning’ with regard to the definition of ‘task’ as such: “tasks are always activities where the target language is used by the learner for a communicative purpose (goal) in order to achieve an outcome” (Willis, 1996, p. 23). Task-based classroom activities are envisioned here in terms of a tripartite division into what Willis refers to as the ‘pre-task’, ‘task cycle’ and ‘language focus’ components.

Jane Willis’ framework for task-based learning (Adapted from Willis 1996: 53)

PRE-TASK

TASK CYCLE

Language FOCUS

In a word, Willis’ framework for TBL is a complete guide to the methodology and practice of task-based language teaching. It explains each component in a typical task-based lesson, beginning from the first phase of task i.e. setting up a task, then the task cycle, which further leads to language-focused work, encouraging in the learner both accuracy and fluency.

In the pre-task phase, the teacher introduces the topic and the task to learners, and gives related words and phrases. In the task-cycle, learners use the language to perform the task and in the last phase i.e. language focus, learners closely specific features occurring in language used while doing the task.

Nunan (2004) presents task cycle into three phases: a pre-task phase, a task-proper phase and a follow-up phase.

Advantages of Task-based Language Learning:

- It’s a learner-centric approach.
- It enables learner to understand language as a tool than a specific goal.

- It can bring teaching from abstract knowledge to real world application.
- It creates classes interesting and address the to the students' needs.
- Learners develop skills when they are 'pushed' to perform in the classroom (Nunan,2004).
- It is used to elicit language production, interaction, negotiation of meaning, processing of input, and focus on form, all of which are believed to foster second language acquisition. (Branden, 2008)
- The use of tasks in English language classroom encourages participants to value their own experiences, beliefs, opinions and knowledge and to reflect on these and evaluate them in the light of new input.

Issues concerning Task-based Learning:

Though it encourages learners to use their own language and vocabulary, teacher should monitor the right usage. Otherwise students will not learn new phrases or words. This can be solved by having a group of students who have command over language and students who have poor language skills. Another face of this approach is that learning process does not get over even though the task cycle is complete. It means learning process should go on. It should not be limited to a given task. If the teacher does not follow up in the post task phase, half of the task based learning process is wasted.

Conclusion:

Hence, Task-based Language Teaching is one of the most innovative teaching methods in ELT. Ellis (2009:222) has remarkably mentioned that TBLT is based on the principle that language learning will progress most successfully if teaching aims simply to create contexts in which the learner's natural language learning capacity can be nurtured rather than making a systematic attempt to teach the language bit by bit.

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