

Integrating Form-Focused Instruction in a Task-Based Communicative Classroom

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Abstract

Task-Based Language Teaching undermines the role of formal instruction in language learning and may even consider it detrimental. TBLT is interesting from the standpoint of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) because it attempts to address the problem of holding learners' focus on meaning and doing things with language while also incorporating the creation of their language resources into the teaching cycle. TBLT also seeks to introduce authentic language usage into the classroom by providing opportunities for students to practice their language skills. The present paper examines and proves that form-focused instruction can co-exist in a TBLT classroom without affecting the communicative nature of the classroom. The paper also surveys different lines of support for the integration of the approach known as Form-Focused Instruction within Task-based language teaching.

Keywords: — Task-Based Language Teaching, form-focused instruction, instructional options, English language learning, second language acquisition.

1. Introduction

TBLT uses real-life scenarios in the classroom to help students connect more effectively by allowing students to use the target language for practical purposes is a basic pedagogical concept (**Van den Branden, 2009**). According to **Willis and Willis (2007)**, TBLT reflects the real world on three levels: *meaning, discourse and activity*. At the meaning stage, TBLT enables students to engage in the development of meaning that is important to life outside of the classroom, such as meaning that is connected to their subject knowledge or potential career. Where the context is important, the relationship immediately becomes genuine, resulting in a debate that is more realistic. Nonetheless, for meaning and discourse to represent genuine interlocutors' exchange, the practise must be equally experiential in nature, since the nature of meaning and discourse can miss the mark without a proper mission.

Since the mid-1980s, efforts have been taken to define task, and many have formulated the principles and definitions of the word 'task'. **Bygate, Skehan**, and Swain have observed that "definitions of task will need to differ according to the purposes for which the tasks are used" (**Bygate et al., 2001, p. 11**). They have stated that "a task is an activity which requires learners to use language, with emphasis on meaning, to attain an objective" (ibid). In **Prabhu's (1987)** words, a task is "an activity which 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" (p. 24). A task is different from the traditional language exercise. **Bygate (2003)** distinguishes between tasks and exercises to elucidate the concept of task-based instruction. He defines exercise as "activities which practice parts of a skill, a new sub-skill or a new piece of knowledge" and task as "activities which practice the whole integrated skill in some way" (p. 176). **Breen (1987)** and **Prabhu (1987)** have considered a language task to be an activity for those who undertake it to achieve a range of possible outcomes. So, a task is not a piece meal approach to teaching a language. My task, irrespective of a language focus, will provide room for realistic practice of language skills.

2. What makes tasks relevant?

The learner, not the instructor, is the focus of TBLT, and it is up to the teacher to devise and implement various tasks that enable the learner to experiment with the foreign language spontaneously, independently, and creatively. Each task will give the learner a new personal experience in the target language, and the instructor will play an important role here. He or she must accept responsibility for his or her actions. The consciousness-raising part of the TBL method is crucial to the success of TBL, here the teacher must help learners to distinguish differences and similarities, and help them correct, explain and intensify their insights of the foreign language. According to Willis (1996), tasks

- expose learners to worthwhile and authentic language.
- motivate learners to engage in language use.
- focus on language at some point in a task-cycle.

3. Tasks and the Form-focused Instruction

Tasks allow students to focus on forms that they have already processed for meaning throughout the task cycle. It is divided into two sections: research and practise. The instructor uses awareness-raising activities during the study stage to help the students notice linguistic features from the report stage. The learners are then put through a series of exercises aimed at recognising and processing specific language features in the assignment text or transcript. Finally, the teacher walks the learners through the lecture. Learners' language comprehension evolves as a result of the understanding and generalisation processes, and the associated language features become part of their internalised language structure. As the framework's final step, the practise stage follows the study cycle. Finally, the teacher conducts practise activities based on the language study in order to build learners' trust and assist them in systematising and broadening their understanding so that they can continue to learn outside of the classroom and after they have completed their language course.

Many aspects of task-based language teaching have been investigated in relation to classroom practises in recent years. Many studies have been conducted into the implementation of this approach, and it has been shown to a satisfactory degree that it achieves the teacher's and learner's goals. **Sharman (2011)** emphasised the value of meaning-focused activities in a grammar class in her study "Task Based Teaching: Using Modals for ESL Learners." According to her, if students want to improve their language skills, they must be able to use the second language openly and effectively in circumstances that are similar to those encountered outside of the classroom. The study also claims that the primary goal of task-based instruction is to engage the learner in the task's completion and to inspire them to learn the target language. In addition to providing motivational value, task-based pedagogy is the most

effective and productive method of ensuring enthusiastic participation of the learner in the learning process. The components of the tasks, as well as their relationship to linguistic form and context, have the potential for a concrete experiment, even though they have yet to be explored. As a consequence, task-based language teaching encourages us to incorporate it in language classrooms, resulting in authentic and long-term outcomes.

4. Objectives of the study

The purpose of this study is to find out whether form-focused instruction can co-exist in a TBLT classroom without affecting the communicative nature of the classroom.

5. Subjects of the Study

The study took place at St. Jude's College in Thoothoor, where English is the medium of instruction and the learners' first language is either Tamil or Malayalam. Kanyakumari is the location of the college. 56 first-year students from the Physics Department from the 2018-19 batches were selected. Despite having studied English for ten to twelve years, their language skills were below average. This indicated that they needed to work on their communication.

6. Tasks used for the study

For the pilot project, five language learning tasks were created specifically for it. From August 6 to August 23, 2018, the tasks were field-tested for three weeks. During the pilot, it was felt that more attention to the procedures was needed for easy implementation. As a result, guidelines for classroom procedures were included in the tasks whenever they were required. The tasks were created based on the specified textbook to ensure that the students did not miss any of their daily classes. The parts of the second semester General English Text Expressions-II that dealt with grammar elements were especially useful for teaching and learning.

7. Research Methodology

The study's goal is to simplify the tasks so that learners can learn grammar while still being challenged. Furthermore, the researcher's understanding of the task-oriented language teaching methodology is critical, and her success in task-design is based on her knowledge of previous academic work. According to pre-research conducted by pre-observation and pre-tests, first-year English Department students had trouble mastering English tenses in Grammar class. They had poor grammar skills, particularly in the tenses. They found it difficult to use auxiliaries or to judge the verb form in relation to the tense, and to use the correct form that corresponded to the meaning. Based on these results, the aim of this study is to use TBLT to discover ways to enhance their grammar usage during communication.

A pre-test was conducted on communicative grounds. It was designed to assess learners' ability to apply that knowledge to perform acts in specific contexts. The analysis and assessment of the scripts reveal that most of the learners are below average when it comes to the use of grammar in context to perform communicative tasks. With an average score of 42 from the total number of 50 learners, 60% of learners scored above 40%. Scripts of the 40% of learners who got a score less than that of the basic requirement revealed the following issues:

- Some irregular verbs confuse learners. For instance, the verbs ‘have’ and ‘be’ have different forms in the simple present (has, am, are...)
- Possessive case
- Auxiliary verb usage in the question and negative form.
- Subject-verb agreement

From the analysis of the communicative pre-test scores, it is clear that learners face difficulties in applying grammar rules while using the target language. The average score in this test was only 18% while 25% of learners scored above 50%. The learners who scored below 50% had difficulties in transferring their grammatical knowledge into communicative language use

8. Research Implementation

As mentioned elsewhere, TBLT was experimented with the first-year learners of St. Jude’s College, Thoothoor and the details and analysis of the tasks used and the classroom participation are presented below:.

TASK – 1

The first meeting was held for about 50 minutes from 10 a.m. to 10.55 a.m. After the pleasantries, the teacher introduced the pre-task to the learners.

Pre-task: The teacher began the session asking learners about their daily routines. A series of visuals containing people performing various daily routines was displayed to the class. The various routines with descriptions were shared with the learners through a brainstorming session. The learners, as anticipated, were hesitant at the start of the exercise but gradually warmed to the ideas that were being shared in the classroom. The task was more generic and the learners enthusiastically participated in describing the actions of the images displayed, besides sharing their own experiences. Although the lesson was handled in English, in order to make the learners feel comfortable, the teacher allowed the use of mother tongue, Tamil or Malayalam, only when they had queries about the task. The visuals which comprised of worksheets were distributed to the learners. There were unanimous replies in chorus but the learners were, to a large extent, reserved in answering individually.

Task-Cycle: The main task comprised of a few steps. The teacher asked the learners to list their daily activities based on the picture and the learners followed as per instruction. They were also divided into groups of four. Some learners looked exceptionally inquisitive to make the list but many learners still looked confused and unsure about composing the list. The teacher understood the bewilderment and helped every confused learner by trying to clear the misunderstanding. After the activities were listed, the teacher asked the learners to read their list to each other and find the similarities and dissimilarities of actions performed by them to weed out similar activities. Through the course of the session, the teacher controlled the situation of the class by walking around each group and enquiring whether the learners found any difficulty. Most learners were enthusiastic about the task and cooperatively accomplishing their duty.

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In the last cycle of the session, a representative of each group presented the results to the entire class and the other groups had to focus on the spokespersons. The learners were asked to present their summary in complete sentences and most of them stuck to the instruction. While the learner-leader presented the final list, the teacher paid attention to the speakers' sentences to analyse if they committed any grammatical errors.

Post-task: On completion of the presentation, three sentences from the learner's list were selected and analysed to see whether they comprehended the meaning of the sentence. Two sentences which had incorrect grammar and one correct sentence were presented to the class. The teacher asked the learners to identify if the given sentences were grammatically correct. This resulted in various responses with some learners stating that there were two incorrect sentences and one correct sentence and a few stating that two sentences were correct and one incorrect, the remaining thought that all the given sentences were incorrect. The learner finally confirmed that the first and the second sentences were incorrect and the last one was correct. The learners then reasoned out why the two sentences were ungrammatical.

The teacher asked the learners to come up with their explanation for the idea of tenses and lead a brainstorming session with the learners to help the learners verify for themselves the form and rules of the simple present tense. Finally, a few learners were invited to the board and they were asked to recall their list and write them on the board. The process of raising consciousness was repeated after each learner completed the list with proper verbal assistance from their team members.

TASK - 2

The second meeting was held in the morning for about 50 minutes from 10 a.m. to 10.55 a.m. After the pleasantries, the teacher introduced the pre-task to the learners and the materials of the previous session were revised.

Pre-task: The teacher began the session by giving clues about a current personality. Five clues were given in sentences using the simple present tense. The learners were not aware of the form but began to guess the personality by voicing out their opinion. The teacher repeated the clues and the learners were made to guess again. The learners eventually found the personality to be a film actor. Words relating to both the personalities and actions relating to the present were shared by the teacher to the learners through a brainstorming session along with a display of words on the board. The learners were excited as the topic brought a lot of pop culture into the classroom. The learners did not show any hesitation as in the previous session but were comfortable with the teacher and the lesson. As the task was not specific to a particular grammatical lesson, the learners never felt intimidated and they happily participated in naming the words displayed and in sharing their own favourite personalities. Although the lesson was handled in English, the use of the mother tongue was still present.

Task-Cycle: The teacher wrote a list of personalities on the board and asked the learners to go through them. The class was divided into two teams. The teacher had asked the learners of each team to take any personality from the given list and frame five clues for their opponents. The learners brainstormed and framed questions although most of the thinking and writing were carried out by learners who were proficient in English.

The learners were made to face their opponents and all the learners enthusiastically participated in the task. On completion of the task, all the members of both teams were asked to write down the sentences

which they had framed. The teacher helped individuals who were confused by trying to identify their problems. Through the course of the session, the teacher controlled the situation of the class by walking around each group and helping them with framing of clues. Most learners were enthusiastic about the task and cooperatively accomplishing their duty.

In the last cycle of the session, the sentences written by the learners were shared in the classroom and the teacher explained the sentence structure and analysed if the clues had matched the description of the personality.

Post-task: In this cycle, the aim was to provide and expose the learners to a massive amount of inputs concerning the subject-verb agreement. The teacher presented some sentences through the task of providing those clues. The idea of a famous personality had got the attention of the learners and enabled them to involve themselves in the task. Some learners still struggled in understanding the formation of such types of sentences but were able to grasp the idea of the task. The learners understood the material and the teacher then helped them to redo the sentences into other forms, like positives, negatives, or interrogative sentences.

TASK - 3

This meeting was held in the afternoon from 1.30 p.m. to 2.30 p.m. After the formalities, the teacher started the class by reviewing and revising the previous day's class. Besides, some of the learners' doubts were clarified.

Pre-task: The teacher began the session with a series of actions. The teacher did not provide any lip movement, hand-gestures as a clue to the alphabet and did not use any properties either. The learners were made to guess the action that the teacher was performing. The teacher took about five minutes to make the learners guess the action. Most of the learners made one-word statements like "running, cycling, jogging and rowing". The teacher finally agreed upon the action provided by the learners. The learners were excited and were completely involved in the task. As the task involved a lot of physical movement, the learners felt more comfortable and relaxed in the class as opposed to the rigid and strict form of the posture in other classes. The teacher was also able to get the attention of all the learners in the classroom due to the extensive physical movement demanded by the task. The teacher used this example to set the rules for the main task. A list of words was provided by the teacher for further explanation. Although the learners used English to guess the actions, the mother tongue was used, especially in order to explain some concrete nouns learners came across through the task. The teacher asked the learners to avoid such practices in the main task.

Task-Cycle: The teacher divided the class into two teams. The learners were asked to prepare a list of words for the opponent team. The teacher reiterated the rules of the game. Only one minute was allowed for the opposing team to guess the clue. The teams were asked to pick difficult words and the teacher allowed the presenter to use the dictionary in case of confusion. The team had to guess using complete sentences, i.e. 'You are jay-walking'. The lists were swapped by both the teams and the task commenced. The learners showed avid interest and enthusiasm in the task. Most of the presenters used the dictionary which showed that the learners had taken difficult words. The learners nevertheless tried to guess the actions that were performed. The proficient learners were able to guess the exact word but most learners were able to guess a synonymous equivalent. Through the course of the session, the

teacher was actively silent making sure that the learners did the task without any issues until the right answer was stated. Most of the learners participated with great enthusiasm in the task.

Post-task: On completion of the main task, the teacher took down some of the examples and wrote them on the board. The learners were asked to ascertain if the sentences mentioned were correct or incorrect. While some of the learners were able to guess the correct answers, most learners were confused. The teacher then explained the form and the uses of present continuous with apt examples taken from the conversations of the learners. In the end, the teacher gave them ten sentences to analyse by correlating with the material given. This activity helped them comprehend and use present continuous form appropriately.

TASK – 4

This meeting was held at the end of July in the same week with the third meeting. The class began with the teacher asking learners some questions regarding the activities of previous meeting and then continued to explain the topic.

Pre-task: The teacher asked the learners questions about their daily activities. The learners answered with the notion that the learner was going to re-do the first task. But the teacher began asking specific questions about particular routines that were carried out on specific occasions, i.e. ‘Do you wear a sweater?’ The learners were a bit confused but continued to answer them. The teacher went on to provide a list of verb cards that the learners were asked to enact.

Task-Cycle: This task focused on activities that happened regularly or habitually at certain times of the day. Each learner was then asked to take the verb cards from the box and enact the verb in front of the class to complete the task. Each learner was given a chance to do three actions each. The game was made more difficult by not including the lists on the chalkboard and asking the ‘learner-actors’ to think of actions on the spot.

Post-task: For a better understanding of present simple and present continuous tenses, learners were provided signal words like always, often, usually, sometimes, seldom, never, every day, every week, every year, on Mondays to denote simple present and now, at the moment, Look!, Listen! to denote present continuous tense. The teacher followed it up with getting more examples from the learners and gradually let the learners guess the uses of the examples given. The learners seemed to grasp the idea that grammar is meant for communication, and the language functions we perform using the grammatical structures are more important. The teacher gave them certain sentences in the present simple and asked them to change those sentences into present continuous forms. This activity helped learners understand the difference between present simple tense with present continuous tense for better language use.

TASK - 5

The meeting began on time and comprised of 50 minutes from 11 a.m. to 11.50 a.m. After the pleasantries, the teacher reviewed the material of the previous session and introduced the pre-task to the learners.

Pre-task: The teacher wrote a headline on the board and initiated discussion among the learners. The learners began to share their ideas with the class. It should be noted that although the discussion was

carried out in English, learners could not restrain from the use of the mother tongue. The teacher allowed the discussion to progress but dropped hints at losing points because of the use of mother tongue. They came up with interesting ideas during the discussion and the teacher asked them to work in pairs and write a report on the given headline.

Task-Cycle: As the learners were already working in pairs, the teacher gave a newspaper article to each pair. They had to read the article and mark sentences in present perfect. Learners actively performed the task and surprisingly they raised many questions. After finishing the task, each pair presented the sentences in front of the class.

Post-task: When the learners had presented their sentences, the teacher asked them to pay attention and analyse the sentences based on the form, meaning and use of the present perfect tense. After they had analysed those sentences, the teacher divided the board into three columns and wrote some irregular verbs in the first column, their simple past form in the second column, and finally the past participle in the third column. The teacher gave examples as they went over each verb. Later, the teacher made the learners write a few sentences. During the course of the task, the teacher and the observers were able to make out some of the difficulties the learners faced. The teacher wrote some sentences in present perfect tense on the board and asked the learners to come up with the rules and the structure. Later, the learners worked in pairs to fill a partially completed chart of irregular verb forms.

9. Analysis of the Pre- and Post-Test Scores

The performance of the learners after the study was significantly higher than it was before the intervention. The results of the communicative test showed that the learners improved their linguistic competence and interestingly in the process strengthened their vocabulary base too. The pre-test average score was 18% whereas the average score in the post-test was 31%. The highest score was 54 and the lowest was 12. The result was significantly good. The improvement was shown in all aspects, as the average of the post-test increased by 13%. This indicates that understanding of the learners and mastery of tense has improved significantly.

Though the post-test results showed improvement, many learners had scored below 50. Learners sometimes made mistakes in the proper use of verb forms as they attempted to express the time of an event in the target language. Learners also had difficulty in understanding the text and in finding irregular verbs or unfamiliar vocabulary. They still needed much help as they were confused. Some of the learners said that they had difficulties in using irregular verbs. In this cycle, the teacher focused more on the learners who got a low score.

10. Findings of the study

The level of participation of the students in class increased significantly. Stakeholders will be resistant to the introduction of new methodology. On the contrary, in only a few schools, the majority of the students seemed to be at ease. Their successful engagement demonstrated this. Learners did not voluntarily engage in discussions prior to the implementation of TBLT, and only replied with a few words and sentences when called upon. Regardless of their class success level, both students were eager to share their answers to the challenge at hand.

Learners were asked to justify their responses, and the majority of them persevered even though the challenge became more difficult. After frequent use of the language, the students began to learn from their mistakes. According to the observers, TBLT did a good job of building an atmosphere where all students felt free to express their thoughts and feelings.

When learners were completing assignments, they were given several grammatical structures and suggested contents. The students collaborated on language forms and practised new words, phrases, or patterns. It was accomplished by raising awareness. However, some students often experienced difficulties, especially linguistic issues while interacting with peers. The learners were expected to not acquire immediate command of these characteristics, but by recognising them, they would be more likely to remember them as they encountered them in other activities.

11. Conclusion

Grammar is considered to be a difficult subject to teach and learn for both teachers and students. Learners who master the rules of grammar often struggle miserably when it comes to using the language in relevant situations. Evidence indicate that steady progress is likely. The form-focused instruction can easily be integrated in to the TBLT framework by focusing more on the final cycle of the TBLT framework.

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