Task-based Language Teaching: An Approach of Learner-Centeredness

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Abstract

TBLT has become a dominant approach to language teaching worldwide. It emphasizes the use of authentic language and the target language in order to complete meaningful tasks, rather than the accurate production of language forms. Tasks create contexts and opportunities that facilitate second language acquisition. It offers a platform for learners to display their skills through their efforts and develops them further. Since language learners make an effort to perform a task, they have a rich opportunity to interact with their peers. This paper displays how TBLT signifies a paradigm move from traditional teacher-centred methods of language teaching, thus giving learners an opportunity to be livelier in the language classroom. The paper also demonstrates how the role of the teacher is not diminished in TBLT: though, the teacher becomes a facilitator by the side more frequently than not rather than being a monitor.

Keywords: Task Performance, English Language Teaching, Task-Based Language Teaching, Communicative Language Teaching.

1.Introduction

Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT) is a sprout of the common concept of Communicative Language Teaching which epitomizes a paradigm shift from the structure- oriented drill methods of language teaching which were popular during the 1950s and 1960s to the communicative function-oriented language teaching which is directed towards making language pedagogy more and more learner need and purpose oriented, as well as learning-centered. Communicative Language teaching grew out of Dell Hymes' notion of communicative competence which, as **Willis and Willis (2001:174)** point out "encouraged a more critical look at language and sharpened awareness of the need to make language relevant to students needs and to provide opportunities for language use in the classroom". Inherent in this observation is the central position which the learner occupies in the learning process, a movement away from the dynamics of the traditional language classroom in which the teacher is viewed not only as the organizer and controller of all classroom activities but also as the evaluator of learners' performance. This dominant role of the teacher is based on the supposition that the teacher is the source of all knowledge. The learner is viewed as a receptacle to be filled with the knowledge given by the teacher.

Paolo Freire, the Brazilian educator, monumental work Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1982), calls this the in his banking system of education in which the learners are considered to be similar to bank accounts into which regular deposits were made to be drawn later for specific purposes like examination. Apparently, the responsibility here lies on the individuals making the deposits for it is they who are responsible for earning the money and it is only they who can make the bank accounts swell. The teacher here bears the burden of the whole class on his or her shoulders and the learner merely listens to the teacher and may be sometimes repeats or reacts to his or her directions. Hence the learner is reduced to a passive, reactive role with no control over content or methods. This commanding role of the teacher stems from the long-cherished traditional idea that pedagogic success depends on how eloquently a teacher teaches. **Kumaravadivelu (2006:44)** states that "teaching, however decisive, cannot automatically lead to learning for the simple purpose that learning is primarily a personal construct controlled by the individual learner". Hence the teacher can at best create and exploit learning opportunities by involving the learners in the learning process because teaching and learning are basically collaborative in nature.

TBLT disrupts the hierarchies of the traditional classroom since the very act of trying to complete a communicative task involves planning and using strategies on the part of the learner. A communicative task has been defined by **Nunan (2004: 4)** as "a piece of classroom work that 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". Evidently, the focus here is on meaning rather than grammatical form but that does not mean that knowledge of grammatical form is not important at all. In fact, Nunan carefully highlights the interrelation between meaning and form pointing out that grammar exists to enable the language user to express different communicative meanings. Another interesting point which shoots from Nunan's definition is the one which forms the basis of TBLT and that is 'learning by doing, which involves learners using the Target Language even though they have not gained a decent command over it. This contrasts with the traditional synthetic approaches in which, as **Wilkins (1976: 2)** points out "different parts of the language are taught separately and step by step so that acquisition is a process of gradual accumulation of parts until the whole structure of language has been built up". These 'synthetic approaches have their germ in the belief that the purpose of all teaching is to simplify learning and one way of doing that is to break down the contents into smaller parts and then present them in a sequential and graded manner. But then, is this a very useful way of teaching a second or a foreign language?

Most second language acquisition studies have shown that language learning does not occur in a direct, additive way. In fact, it has been found that there is no direct relationship between input and intake. For instance, the morpheme order' studies of **Dulay and Burt** (cited in **Ellis, 1985, p. 55)** show that certain grammatical morphemes are acquired in a pre-determined way, irrespective of the order in which instruction is given. Moreover, many studies (Prabhu's Bangalore Project. 1987, for instance) have shown that learners learn a foreign or a second language better through the process of interacting, negotiating and conveying meanings in purposeful situations. TBLT provides an opportunity for this.

As **Williams and Burden (1997: 168)** point out, a task is "a forum within which meaningful interaction between two or more participants can take place. It is through the ensuing exchange and

negotiation of meanings that learners' knowledge of the language system develops". But how is this "exchange and negotiation of meanings" supposed to take place for learners who have not gained even a bit of mastery of the Target Language? Would it not be like, as **Ian Tudor (2001: 79)** points out, simply throwing learners into wholly uncontrolled and undirected language use" which is "as dubious a strategy with respect to language learning as doing the same with someone who is learning to swim"? A possible answer to a question like this is perhaps the fact that when learners are set tasks in order that they attain communicative competence, grammar and vocabulary are not thrown away altogether but they are not the focus of the lessons; they are dealt with only when the tasks require them.

TBLT is denoted as a learner-centred/learner-directed approach. The idea of learner-centeredness has become popular because of the spread of CLT. In TBLT, learners are considered as active co-constructors of language learning from planning to evaluation, taking into account their characteristics in decision-making and by encouraging their participation in this process.

The framework for task-based learning, stated by **Willis (1996)**, comprises three main stages for language learning that can be stated as follows; pre-task, task-cycle (task) and post-task stages (language focus). **Willis (1996)** has specified that these phrases are planned very prudently to produce the most reasonable conditions for language acquisition, and accordingly offers valuable learning opportunities to match different types of learners. An illustration of the three stages is presented below:
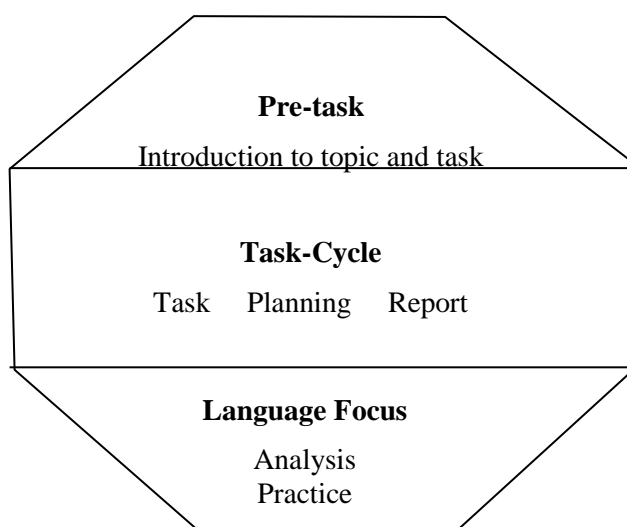

Pre-task
Introduction to topic and task

Task-Cycle

Task   Planning   Report

Language Focus
Analysis
Practice

Fig.1 Willis' Framework for Task-Based Learning (Willis and Willis, 1996: 60)

Pre –Task: The objective of the pre-task cycle is to increase the awareness of tasks in ways that improve learning. This stage is seen as an introduction to the topic and task. It can be the study of useful words and phrases, brainstorming activities or listening to native speakers who do the tasks. **Willis (1996)** has said that the goal of tasks is to provide a real intention for language use and to create a natural context for language study. **Skehan (1998)** has pointed out that a teacher has two options in the pre-task cycle: To concentrate on the common meaning of the task or to focus on linguistic possibilities. These two variables can be taken into account by one of these ways: (i) Motivate learners to perform tasks during task-stage, (ii) Ask learners to sustain a framework for performing the task,

(iii) Encourage learners to do non-task activities to familiarise themselves with the performance of the task and (iv) Plan the main task performance.

The pre-task is a situation in which the teacher provides instructions to make the learners comprehend the nature of the activity as to what has to be done and how it is to be done. In the pre-task, the teacher familiarizes the class with the topic and the task activating topic-related words and phrases. The pre-task is, therefore, preparation of the task with the support of the teacher. During the pre-task cycle, the teacher introduces and describes the topic to the class, illustrates useful topic-related words and phrases, and makes certain that the learners understand task instructions. The learners may hear a recording of a similar task being done, note down useful words and phrases from the recording or other pre-task activities, and prepare for the task for a few minutes. This initial stage provides useful exposure to assist the learners to recollect appropriate words and phrases and to be familiar with new ones.

The immediate motivation of learners in the TBLT classroom lies in the intellectual- cum-practical pleasure and enjoyment of doing the tasks and solving problems. The learners already have the desire to do well to gain their peers' approval and recognition. They would, of course, be motivated to perform the tasks and their success lies not in a hundred percentage learning, but in engaging themselves in activities. Correction of repetitive tasks would lead to frustration and a negative outlook. The tasks should, therefore, be reasonable enough to accommodate all levels of learners. They should not be too easy or too hard. A perfect task should be complex but it must have a reachable or achievable goal for learners.

Task-Cycle: The Task-Cycle consists of three components, such as task, planning and report. It presents learners the possibility to use whatever language they already know to perform the task, and then to develop that language, under the guidance of the teacher, while preparing their reports of the task. At the task stage, learners begin performing a communication task, using the background language they have already learned. Since the task is a goal-oriented activity, it allows the learners to achieve a real outcome. The learners make a plan on how to tell the other groups about what they did and how it went. Then they report on the task orally or in written form and compare notes on what has happened.

Willis (1996) categorises six types of tasks. They are Listing, Ordering and sorting, Comparing, Problem solving, sharing personal experiences and Creative tasks. For each task, a definite purpose is committed that must be accomplished within a specific period. The teacher stands back and acts as a monitor, but encourages the learners' communicative efforts in the target language, and briefly comments on the context. Since the learners realise that they can achieve the goals without the teachers' direct assistance, their confidence and motivation will increase. Furthermore, based on the 'output' principle, the use of language is likely to motivate 'intake' of the acquisition of new forms, **(Willis 1996)**. This stage, which prioritizes spontaneous, exploratory discussion and confidence building, is essential for the learners to acquire language.

According to linguists, there are three components of a task-cycle such as the task, planning and report. Following the task stage, there is a planning stage, in which the learners report to the entire class either orally or in writing on how they did the task and what they decided or learned. They draft and rehearse the report. The teacher acts as a language adviser and gives feedback and assists the learners to correct

their language. He/she ensures that the purpose of the report is obvious and supports the learners to practice oral reports or organize written reports for a public presentation in the next stage. Since the learners may have difficulties in using language forms and features, a focus on form is natural and teacher's guidance and correction are probably be of mort use at the planning stage. This stage also emphasizes clarity, organisation and accuracy.

At the report stage, the teacher selects certain groups to present their oral or written reports on the task to the entire class. The teacher simply acts as a chairperson, briefly comments on the content and form, and at the end summarises it. The learners, at this report stage, listen to others performing the same task and compare the ways they did the task themselves. This cycle gives a natural incentive to improve their language. It persuades them to think about the form and meaning; accuracy and fluency when they report in the target language. It also gives them a supportive exposure to what other learners have done in the same task.

Moreover, at the Task-Cycle stage, exposure to language use can be provided at different stages based on the various types of tasks. It can be offered either before or during the task-cycle where the learners listen to recordings of others performing the same/similar task, or read a text appropriate to the task topic, and relate this to their own experience of doing the task.

Language Focus: Language Focus, the last cycle of the framework, promotes the learners to focus their attention on forms that they have already processed for meaning all through the task-cycle. It has two components: analysis and practice. At the analysis stage, the teacher makes the learners notice linguistic features of the report stage through consciousness-raising activities. The learners then carry out activities to identify and process specific language features from the task text or transcript. The teacher finally reviews the analysis with the class. The learners' language knowledge is developed through the identification and generalization process and the relevant language features become part of their internalised language system. Next to the analysis cycle, the final stage of the framework is the practice stage. In this last stage, the teacher conducts practice activities, based on the language analysis, to build learners' confidence and assist them to systematise their knowledge and widen their understanding, so that, they can continue to learn outside the classroom and even after their language course.

Although the role of a teacher is not central, it is still essential for successful learning. It involves the selection or development of tasks that motivate and involve appropriate content. The content must grant opportunities for input, negotiation of meaning, and output **(Branden, 2006)**. A teacher's role commences long before the lesson at the planning stage itself. This is when several decisions are prepared, such as the choice of a task, its objectives, content and classroom management. In the course of a task, the teacher works in ways that facilitate language acquisition. Finally, evaluation is the key role for teachers and that too is done in collaboration with the learners. This should replicate the commitment to the task and the achievement of the goal, which should be used for future planning.

Different aspects of the teachers' roles are given different emphasis by various scholars. **Richards and Rogers (2001)** have defined three different roles for TBLT teachers. Firstly, teachers play the role of a selector and task sequencer. Therefore, they have an effective role in selecting, adjusting, creating tasks and then sequencing them according to the needs, interests, and language proficiency levels of the learners. Secondly, the teacher gets the role of preparing learners for tasks. Teachers can present

some pre-task training that includes the introduction of the topic, describing task instructions, helping learners learn or recall useful words and phrases to facilitate the completion of the task and provide a partial display of the task process.

Van Avermaet et al. (2006) have considered the key role of the teacher in TBLT to be a motivator. Besides the teacher is the one who makes certain that the processes that are crucial for language acquisition, such as interaction and focus on form take place in the classroom. The teacher, therefore, selects and presents tasks in a way that keeps learners interested, stimulated and challenged. They make ample effort and thereby increase the level of learning competence in the target language. By implication, the teacher also has another key role to play in creating conditions that promote learner involvement. This can be attained by planned and unplanned intervention, by keeping a focus on meaning, by encouraging learner initiative, and by asking questions instead of only providing information and explanation.

The teacher's role will change during the task-cycle. For instance, in the pre-task cycle, the teacher is more active in introducing the task, while his or her role during task performance involves monitoring, instead of being an active participant. In this way, learners avoid over-reliance on teacher's support and learn to complete their tasks independently. At the post-task stage, when learners are expected to prepare a statement of their task outcomes, the teacher becomes more active again – acting as a language advisor. This does not mean that teachers deal with every language problem that comes up, but they encourage learners to work it out for themselves. They can also suggest other resources to the learners, such as using a dictionary. If a presentation is made at the post-task stage, the role of a teacher may be that of a chairperson, who introduces, keeps time, sums up and gives feedback.

However, **Ellis (2009)** has argued, that some TBLT approaches allow for more teacher-centred instruction at certain stages. For instance, **Prabhu (1987)** has described the teacher as a role model in the pre-task cycle. **Samuda & Bygate, (2009, p. 391)** have suggested that teachers have a "leading from behind" role in the case of a task where a new language is introduced. In that case, the teacher performs as a guide who directs learners to concentrate on both form and meaning and also to their inter-connection.

When considering the role of learners, **Richards and Rogers (2001)** have described three different roles. Learners can first play the role of a group participant to complete many tasks in pairs or small groups. Incidentally, this pair or group work may involve some adaptation for the learners who are more familiar with classroom activities and individual works.

Secondly, the learners are encouraged to assume the role of a monitor. Here learners observe or notice the language used by their peers and themselves to understand the use of linguistic structures in discourse. This noticing of linguistic forms is believed to enhance the communication skills of the learners.

According to **Willis (2001),** TBLT has offered learners with natural exposure or input to use the target language to express what they want to mean. These expressions, which are termed as output can improve the language of the learners and help them analyse and practise language forms. Besides, Willis has also proposed the idea of learner motivation, since it builds on whatever language they know positively so that learners actively engage themselves throughout the task-cycle, think for themselves

and express themselves in their group. It is, therefore, important that the learners develop autonomy and feel empowered by gaining satisfaction in achieving things successfully through language. Learners are also expected to experiment with the expression they have acquired anew, try out things without fear of failure and public correction and to actively control their learning both in and outside their classrooms. Learners, who are usually co-participants in a classroom, are also treated as communicators, that is, they are encouraged to act as language users rather than language learners.

On the whole, if the teacher is prepared to share power in the class with the learners, the learners feel motivated and it is on the sustenance of the learners' motivation to actively partake in the classroom processes, in the performance of the learning tasks that successful learning to a great extent depends. So who should the language teacher be like? Yes, like Moses who performed as a good guide leading his people to the Promised Land. TBLT offers a good opportunity for that.

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