Theoretical Underpinning of Task based Language Teaching and its Role in Developing English Language Skills: A Critical Examination

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Abstract

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. Several attempts have been made to develop an effective method to teach English language. 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 aims to examine the task-based language teaching (TBLT) as a favourite method in the teaching of English language. This foregrounds TBLT a blend of

teaching methodology and syllabus which makes this method stands out unique in the domain of English language teaching.

Keywords: TBLT (Task-Based Language Teaching), Language learning, framework, syllabus design, Assessment

Introduction

Language learning and teaching process have always been a matter of scholarly debate. English language teaching experts and psychologists have propounded a number of theories and methods in order to enhance the efficiency and productivity of language learning process. In the historical development of English language teaching, 1930s marks the beginning of its journey with Grammar Translation approach. And sincethen there have been progressive changes in the approaches and methods in language teaching like structural and communicative approaches and so on. English language teaching is based on the idea that the goal of language acquisition is communicative competence. It adopts concepts, techniques and methods in classroom for recognizing and managing the communicative needs of the language learners.

Task based language teaching is one of the approaches to English language teaching which focuses on the use of authentic language and on asking students to do meaningful tasks while using the target language. Such tasks can include visiting a doctor, conducting an interview, or calling customer service for help. Task based language teaching refers to the use of task as a core unit of planning and instruction in language teaching.

Historicity of task-based language teaching

Historicity of task-based language teaching intends to give an insight into evolution and progression of this approach in the realm of English language teaching emanating from the views and suggestions from experienced teachers and second language researchers.

Tell me and I'll forget; show me and I may remember; involve me and I'll understand.

– Chinese Proverb

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The idea that a language is better acquired by using it meaningfully rather than by learning isolated elements and putting them together in practice may seem like an obvious one to many of us in the present day. Task-based language teaching emphasizes the importance of engaging learners' natural abilities for acquiring language incidentally as they engage with

the language as meaning making tool and thus contrast with structural approach as an object to be systematically taught and intentionally learned.

To understand better task-based language teaching, we go back to communicative language teaching movement which took place in late 1970s. The conceptual idea for communicative language teaching revolves around the "Deep End" strategy, a termed coined by keith Johnston (1982) which was first described by Brumfit (1979). Deep end strategy, says, instead of starting with a language, lets get people to do an activity and find out whether we need to give them language to do it. This approach reverses traditional classroom procedure by putting communication first, so that present – practice – produce becomes communication – presentation /drill – enhanced production. It has similarities with task-based learning as well as the learning of other skills such as sports, cooking or driving because learners start by doing. Thus it appeared to form the crux and backbone of whole idea and motive of task-based language teaching and since then it has drawn attention of decade old experienced teachers such as Jane Willis and many more second language acquisition researchers.

Drawing on researches in second language acquisition, **Long (1985**) argued that there is no reason to assume that presenting the target language as a series of discrete linguistic or sociolinguistic teaching is the best or even way to get learners to synthesize parts into a coherent whole. He saw an approach based on tasks as providing an integrated solution to both syllabus and methodological issues. Task based language teaching combines the idea of syllabus and methodology. TBLT appears to simplify the task of English language teaching through task-based language teaching.

Candlin (1987) claimed that an approach based on tasks would enable learners to Become more aware of their own personalities and social roles. It fosters self-realization and self-fulfilment which in turn enhances self-confidence.

Breen (1989) emphasized the importance of Teachers and students jointly negotiating the content of a course and argued that the task provides the best means for achieving it. He is extremely influential in Putting forward task-based language teaching.

Prabhu (1987) argued that the development of competence in second language requires not systematization of language input or maximization of planned practice but rather the creation of conditions in which learners engage in an effort to cope up with the communication. this could be best achieved having students perform task. In fact, He was the first person to experiment task-based approach in real-life situations. His famous madras communicative language teaching project   and inspired many to carry on the legacy of prabhu in researching

TBLT as an effective approach to teach and English language. His idea was to teach the language, engage learners in doing the task and let the language learning take place.

Nunan (1989) sought to provide teachers with a practical introduction to the design and use of tasks. He claimed that basing language teaching on tasks avoid the traditional distinction between syllabus and methodology.

Approaches to task-based language teaching

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) is an approach to language teaching that relies on the use of tasks as the primary unit of planning and instruction. Some of its proponents (e.g., Willis 1996) see it as a natural progression from Communicative Language Teaching since it takes on several principles from the 1980s communicative language teaching movement.

- ⬜ – Activities that involve real communication are essential for language learning.
- ⬜ – Activities in which language is used for carrying out meaningful tasks promote learning.
- ⬜ – Language that is meaningful to the learner supports the learning process.

Definition of tasks in TBLT

Defining task has proved to be one of the most contended issues in research. From 1980 onwards, several definitions of task have been offered emanating from the research in second language acquisition and teaching methodology. Some of them have been mentioned as follows:

As one of the earliest persons to apply TBLT in the Bangalore project, Prabhu (1987, 24) Defines a 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".

This definition suggests that a task is a form of operation that allows students to use their cognitive processes (thinking) in order to accomplish a desired outcome, with the instructor serving as the task's controller.

Skehan (1998:95) says that task is "an activity in which: meaning isprimary; there is some communication problem to solve; there is some sort of relationship to comparable real-world activities; task completion has some priority; and the assessment of task performance is in terms of task outcome". He defines task in terms of features where meaning is paramount. The most important thing is to understand what is being said; there is some kind of connect to

corresponding real-world activity; The completion of the activity is prioritised; the evaluation of the task is based on the outcome of the task. The fundamental perspective on the task is one that is focused on meaning. In terms of authenticity, it should include tasks that require you to perceive the world.

Likewise Rod Eliis, one of the most influential figure Task Based Language teaching, considers the notion of task to be central in Task Based Language Pedagogy. Ellis (2009) extends the discussion by providing 4 criteria that an activity must satisfy order to be labelled as a task.

Ellis (2009: 223) provides a clear and inclusive set of criteria defining what is meant by 'task':

- ⯄ The primary focus should be on 'meaning' (by which is meant that learners shouldbe mainly concerned with processing the semantic and pragmatic meaning of utterances).
- ⯄ There should be some kind of 'gap' (i.e. a need to convey information, to expressan opinion or to infer meaning).
- ⯄ Learners should largely have to rely on their own resources (linguistic and non-linguistic)in order to complete the activity.
- ⯄ There is a clearly defined outcome other than the use of language (i.e. the languageserves as the means for achieving the outcome, not as an end in its own right).

Classification of tasks:

The pioneers and proponents of TBLT have classified tasks into 'real-world tasks, 'pedagogical tasks', 'cognitive classification of tasks.'

Nunan (2004) classified task into real world task and pedagogic task. Willis (1996) proposes pedagogical classification of tasks based on an examination of the types of activities that are frequently seen in text book contents they are Listing, Ordering and Sorting, Comparing, Problem-Solving, Sharing Experience and Creative tasks. **Prabhu (1987)** classified on the basis of the kind of cognitive activity involved, Prabhu differentiates three types of tasks, (i) Information-gap Activity (ii) Reasoning-gap Activity and (iii) Opening-gap Activity.

Nunan (1999) categorized tasks into five major types according to the strategies underlying them. They include (a) cognitive, (b) interpersonal, (c) linguistic, (d) affective, and (e) creative.

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Significant progress in use of TBLT

The failure of presentation practice production (PPP) in enabling the learners to communicate effectively in English brought the attention of ELT experts to communicative approach where meaning is central and opportunities for language use abound. Task based language teaching is essentially a derivative of communicative approach and has developed within the broader communicative approach. Task based language teaching is a holistic approach. There is a strong relationship between second language acquisition and tasks.

Historically TBLT seems to have gained currency since 1996 with the publication of Jane Will's a framework for task-based learning. This in fact revolutionised the TBLT as an effective approach in the long journey of English language teaching.

 According to Willis (1996), task is "a goal- oriented activity which learners use language to achieve a real outcome. In other words, learners use whatever target language resources they have in order to solve a problem, do a puzzle, play a game or share and compare experiences". Tasks should be goal-oriented and attainable through the use of language in a meaningful means. Willis went on to explain that tasks are always the activities in which learners employ the target language for a communicative purpose in order to attain a goal. The importance of communication in the tasks was underlined as a result of this. The communication is highlighted as the task's outcome in this instance.

To teach a lesson practically with task–based it involves consideration of the stages or components of a lesson that has a task as its principal component. Generally speaking, they all have three principal phrases in common which reflect the chronology of a task-based lesson.

The method of Task-based Language Teaching, according to Jane Willis (1996), is divided into three parts. 'Pre-task' is the first step. The topic of the task is presented at this stage. 'Task-cycle,' also known as 'while task,' is the second stage. Task planning is done at this point, followed by a report. 'Language focus' is the third and final stage. The focus on 'linguistic form' is considered at this stage. Task-based Language Teaching differs from other standard methods at this stage.

Approaches to Syllabus Design

Regarding certain fundamental principles of task-based language teaching in the Asian setting, the British applied linguist David Wilkins (1976) proposed a fundamental difference between 'synthetic' and 'analytic' approaches to syllabus design. In 'synthetic' approaches, different components of the language are taught separately and sequentially, such that

language learning occurs through the progressive accumulation of components until the entire system of the language is formed. In Asia and, indeed, in the rest of world, synthetic methods to language education are the pattern. Wilkins, however, gave an alternative to synthetic approaches in his book Notional Syllabuses. This is referred to as 'analytical methods.' The student is presented with comprehensive 'chunks' of language and asked to examine them in 'analytical methods.'

Task-based approach to syllabus design

In task-based syllabus, the content of the language is a set of complex and purposeful tasks that the students desire or need to perform with the language they are learning. Tasks are used as the units of analysis and they integrate language skills in specific settings of language use. Task-based teaching is different from other approaches in that the learners depend upon their own language resources to accomplish some pieces of work (a process) (a process).

A task-based approach to syllabi creates a favourable for language acquisition and enhances language growth. The task-based approach emphasises the ability to perform a task or activity rather than the explicit teaching of the grammar of the language and has been a source of concern for language teachers, researchers in the field of second language acquisition, and syllabus designers.

Given the fact that not all learners will be at the same level of linguistic competence at the same time, Krashen (1985) suggests that the key to designing a syllabus is to incorporate natural communicative input, making sure that each learner receives some comprehensive input that is appropriate for his or her current stage of linguistic competence.

Finch (2006) states that in order to create a task-based syllabus, the following processes are required:

1.The starting point is the determination of the goal(s) of the course in terms of its pedagogic focus (general or specific purpose), skill focus (listening, speaking, reading, writing, learner training) and language focus (unfocused or focused).

2. The designer then needs to make a broad choice of task types and specify the particular themes the tasks will deal with. The result of this stage is a list of tasks organized by theme and specified in terms of the general activity that the learners will be required to undertake.

3. The third step is to specify the tasks to be used in detail by selecting options related to input, conditions, process, and outcome. The choice should be based on both the psycholinguistic and practical aspects of the teaching context.

4. Finally, the tasks need to be sequenced.

Principles for Designing Task-based Lessons:

The following eight (8) principles of task-based language teaching were put forth by Willis (1996) and Skehan (1998) for designing task-based lessons.

Principle 1: An appropriate level of task difficulty is to be ensured

Principle 2: Clear goals for each task-based lesson are to be established.

Principle 3: An appropriate orientation to performing the task in the students is to be developed. Principle 4: It is to be ensured that students adopt an active role in task-based lessons.

Principle 5: Students are to be encouraged to take risks.

Principle 6: It is to be ensured that the students are primarily focused on meaning while performing a task.

Principle 7: Opportunities for focusing on form are to be provided.

Principle 8: Students are required to evaluate their performance and progress themselves.

These principles are meant to serve as a general guide to the teaching of task-based lessons, rather than as a set of rules to be strictly adhered to. Various people set out identifying the factors how to grade and sequence tasks. General principle is to start with easy task and then move on to difficult tasks.

Schmidt (1990) asserts that one of the primary benefits of task-based training is that well-designed activities can assist recognising Second language syntax, vocabulary, and phonology that may lack perceptual and psychological importance in the untutored conversational settings, and hence may go unrecognised and unlearned.

Willis (1998) indicated that TBLT has the following advantages.

I. Students are free of language control.

II. Students will be exposed to more language.

III. TBLT is a communicative approach where students communicate a lot.

IV. It's interesting and motivating.

V. The need to express oneself leads to exploration of the language.

VI. A natural context is developed from students' experiences with language that is personalized.

VII. TBLT is an organised learning method.

VIII. TBLT promotes the idea that learning is most effective when linked to real-life tasks.

Task based assessment

Task-based language assessment (TBLA) is a framework for language testing that takes the task as the fundamental unit for assessment and testing. In recent, tasks have been figured out in direct language testing for some time. The idea of using task is not as a means for eliciting learners' performance as basis for assessing learners' general abilities, but for determining whether they are capable of performing specific tasks.

Two approaches:

I. Assess the language that results from performing the task.

II. Assess whether the task outcome has been successfully achieved.

This is quite important for teachers to look at outcome of the task whether

Strengths of TBL approach:

I. Task based learning helps learners to interact spontaneously.

II. Automaticity

III. Task based learning gives language learners opportunity to learn vocabulary.

IV. Provides essential conditions for language learning

V. Maximises scope for communication

VI. Experiential learning: The learners' immediate personal experience is taken as the starting point in this approach

Weaknesses of TBL approach:

I. Task difficulty

II. Mismatch between the learners' and teachers' perception with respect to cognitive demand, linguistic demand, task structure

III. Authenticity of tasks

IV. Linguistic deficiency: Learners who are beginners with no linguistic resources find it very difficult to take part in a task

V. Learners' perception: The learner purposes are said to be distributed on a continuum between achievement orientation and survival orientation.

VI. Diverse classes

Conclusion

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Task-based language teaching and learning represents an important approach in teaching English for developing language skills. It has drawn acknowledgement from various ELT experts and second language researchers. Richard and Rodger (2014) consider task-based language teaching as an elixir to language education. Since TBLT integrates teaching methodology and syllabus design both thus it stands out unique in the area of English language teaching. Along with numerous advantages, this method also has certain drawbacks which have been addressed and further research is required to carry out in order to gain insights in the suitability of TBLT as an effective approach.

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