TASK-BASED LANGUAGE TEACHING: AN APPROACH TO IMPLEMENT LANGUAGE SKILLS

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Abstract: Several approaches to second language teaching have been proposed since 19th century. Despite these changes in the field of language teaching task-based language teaching (TBLT) remains to be prevailing approach in language classrooms. In English language education, tasks are viewed as important components to develop proficiency and to facilitate the learning of a second or foreign language by increasing learners' activity in the classroom. The role of a task is to stimulate a natural desire in learners to improve their language competence by challenging them to complete clear, purposeful, and real-world tasks. However, many English language teachers lack full awareness on what TBLT is and how it can be efficiently implemented in their respective classrooms. This paper, therefore, sought to provide insights on implementing language skills in TBLT and provides practitioners extensive insights on the language skills and how these skills can be put into practice in language classrooms.

Keywords- Task-based Language Teaching; Tasks; approach; Listening; speaking; reading; writing; Task definition; role of teacher; learning strategies.

1. Introduction

Recent years have perceived a growing interest in task-based language teaching (TBLT). According to Richards and Rodgers (2001), task-based language teaching is known as an approach which makes up for the insufficiencies of communicative language teaching (CLT) and can be considered as "a logical development of it" (p. 223). With the development of communicative language teaching approach in 1980s and its prominence on communicative ability of language learners, there was a shift from product-oriented to process-oriented syllabuses with three important features of goals, procedure, and specific results and with an emphasis on communication as the key factor in language acquisition. Task-based language teaching, a learner-centred approach, advocates the shift from teacher-dependence to learner independence and provides authentic materials within which students will be able to communicate with each other for a specific purpose with a clear and practical outcome (Benevides & Valvona, 2008). As the term task is frequently used throughout the study, it seems essential to define what is meant by the task. Task has been defined in a variety of ways; as a case in point, Nunan (1999, p.25) has provided such a definition for task: "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". In much the same way, task has been defined as "an activity in which meaning is primary; there is some sort of relationship to the real world; task completion has some priority; and the assessment of task performance is in terms of task outcome" (Skehan, cited in Ellis, 2003, p.25). By the same token, Littlewood (2004) made a distinction between a task and an exercise by claiming that a task is meaning-focused whereas an exercise is form-focused; a task is connected with the pragmatic meaning but an exercise deals with the semantic meaning. According to TBLT (Nunan, 2004), any task must involve three stages which include: 1) pre-task stage (the introduction to the topic and to the task); 2) during task stage (the completion of the task depending on the type of activity); and 3) language focus stage (reviewing the task and highlighting relevant parts for the students to analyze).

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. Skills are the building blocks and effective elements in the process of language development. Implementing language skills in TBLT helps language learners to develop their ability in using two or more of the four skills (i.e. listening, speaking, reading and writing) in contexts and real life situations. In order to provide more focused and significant learning situations, teachers must implement the four language skills while teaching and practising the language.

According to Willis (2008), while learners are doing tasks, they are focusing on meaning and expressing what they really wish to say or write in order to reach the goal of the task. In addition, Willis (2008) explained that task as an efficient activity should include the following criteria in the form of questions. The more confidently you can answer yes to each of these questions, the more task-like the activity.

• Will the activity engage learners' interest?

• Is there a primary focus on meaning?

• Is there a goal or an outcome?

• Is achievement judged in terms of outcome?

• Is completion a priority?

• Does the activity relate to real world activities?" (as cited in Willis & Willis, 2007, pp. 12-14)

Moreover, when designing effective task-based activities, the teacher should take into consideration all the language skills and implement them into the lesson.

2. Task-Based Listening

During task-based listening activities students have to activate knowledge of a topic and context in order to create one's own interpretation of what they have heard. In addition, these activities require information about roles, number and relationship of listeners and speakers who construct meaning of the utterance and respond to each other. On the other hand, teachers should include realistic listening tasks in order to make the lesson effective and meaningful for learners. Moreover, teachers also use various texts including formal and informal language, enhance learners' confidence and help them avoid bad habits such as omitting important words, not paying attention or dreaming while listening. Three stages occur in a listening task:

• Pre-listening stage: This is the preparatory phase. It establishes a framework for listening including asking for learner's knowledge about the topic, guessing content from the title, commenting on a picture, reviewing vocabulary, etc.

• While-listening stage: In this stage learners take part in a listening activity while responding to the task. It includes ordering pictures, completing a timetable, constructing comprehensible notes, analyzing true/false statements, etc.

• Post-listening stage: This phase facilitates development of skills including writing a summary, reading a text related to the topic, practicing role play activities.

As stated in Nunan (1989), listening tasks are further classified in relation to learner's' engagement in bottom-up or top-down processing (as cited in Richards, 1987a). According to Ellis (2003), bottom-up processing involves "understanding a text by analyzing the words and sentences in the text itself" (p.339). Nunan's (1989) study provides that bottom-up processes involve decoding words, sounds and lexical items, dividing the stream of speech into units and using phonological and grammatical signals to organize the input into these units (as cited in Richards, 1987a). On the other hand, Ellis (2003) defines top-down processing as "understanding a text by making use of one's existing knowledge and contextual information" (p. 352). Finally, Nunan (1989) explained that top-down processes involve attaching an interaction to a part of a certain event (complaining, storytelling or joking), attaching persons or places to sections, expecting outcomes and deducing the topic of a speech, the consecution between events and missing items (as cited in Richards, 1987a). Nunan's (1989) study provides that successful listening includes using of meaningful words and phrases, relating the incoming information to a previous knowledge, identifying the aim of an utterance, interpreting intonation and rhythm and extracting important information from longer texts (p. 26).

3. Tasks for Listening Comprehension

As a general rule, listening comprehension will be enhanced if tasks (with communicative purposes) are used instead of decontextualized exercises. Advocating the concept of task, Dunkel (1986, p. 104) puts forward: "The students should be required to do something in response to what they hear that will demonstrate their understanding". Examples of tasks

are making an appointment, making a hotel reservation, filling out a form, labelling a map, etc. Dunkel (1986, p. 104) has classified listening tasks into the following types:

3.1. Matching: wants learners to listen to a text and then match a numbered list of items with a set of options. The purpose of this task is to evaluate how well learners can listen to details.

3.2. Labelling: requires learners to select the labels from a list which best match the blank parts of a visual task (Dunkel, 1986). The purpose of this task is to assess students' ability to understand descriptions of a place which usually includes spatial and direction-related expressions such as opposite to, in front of, etc.

3.3. Selecting (multiple choice): this task requires learners to listen to a text and answer some questions each with 3-4 choices. This task type aims to check the learners' detailed or general understanding of the main points of the listening text and their ability to answer some questions.

3.4. Form-filling: this listening task entails learners to listen to a text and complete the information requested and it evaluates the learners' ability to evaluate the relationships and details.

3.5. *Sentence completion:* this listening task involves learners to listen to sentences which summarize the key information of the text and complete a gap in each sentence using information from the listening text. The purpose is to measure the learners' ability to focus on the main points of the text.

3.6. Summary completion: this listening task requires learners to complete a summary which contains a number of gaps and it assesses learners' understanding of the overall meaning and main points of the section summarized.

3.7. Short-answer questions: this listening task requires learners to listen to a text and read a set of related questions to which they have to write a short answer. Such tasks evaluate learners' ability to listen for concrete facts such as places or times (Dunkel, 1986, p.104).

Here, a distinction should be made between receptive and productive listening activities. The first three task types are referred to as receptive because they assess understanding when one listens. On the other hand, the next three task types are called productive skills and they assess students' understanding and interpretation and are, thus, more demanding since the learner has to focus on the content of listening as well as production of the appropriate content (Dunkel, 1986). Although task-based activities The Impact of Task-based Language Teaching on Listening Skill of Iranian EFL Learners 244 have recently received paramount attention in language learning, a few empirical studies have explored their impact on listening comprehension. The present study focuses on labelling (as a receptive listening task) and form-filling (as a productive listening task) to see if their implementation has any effect on listening ability of Iranian EFL learners.

IV. Task-based Speaking

Out of the four basic skills, i.e. Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing, Speaking is regarded as the most difficult and untamable. Learners begin either by listening or reading and gradually, in the passage of time, switch to speaking and writing. Out of these four skills, listening and reading are skills of comprehension while speaking and writing are known as skills of expression.

Speaking is considered as the most important language skill because speech is used more often than writing in everyday life and it has a great importance in language development of learners' proficiency. Speaking as a basic skill of communication (Bailey and Savage, 1993) is an essential element in determining whether student's English skills have reached a success, particularly in the college. The students who study a speaking course are greatly expected to communicate well in English, practice doing it many times and are not afraid of making any kind of mistake or error. Unfortunately, the success of students` peaking skill is not only influenced by their styles of learning, but also methods or strategies organized by their teachers in the classroom

Learners have to obtain four speaking skills in order to use the spoken language effectively:

• Accuracy: Accuracy involves skill of using grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation (intonation, stress, rhythm) correctly to express various ideas.

• Fluency: Fluency refers to the skill of producing a normal speed of speech which prevents from difficulties in communication such as hesitations or false starts.

 • Appropriateness: Appropriateness includes the skill of using formal or informal language in order to use it in an appropriate situation.

 • Coherence: Coherent speech contains the skill of producing spoken utterances which are connected to each other, such as use of ellipsis, substitutions, pronouns or conjunctions.

When participating in oral discussion, teachers should help learners to build their trust and confidence while speaking because they are often afraid of making mistakes. Teachers also ensure that learners are able to communicate effectively with a proper pronunciation skill, while reminding them to speak English and monitoring their performance during a speaking task, such as walking around, listening to them but avoiding interruptions. Moreover, teachers choose appropriate and purposeful tasks and provide feedback to learners in order to enhance their next speaking performance and help them to develop self-assessment skills.

During task-based activities learners are required to communicate orally and use the spoken language in order to reach a clear outcome, such as oral report, drawing, and list of priorities or written summary. These activities are process- and also goal-oriented which includes expressing ideas and

information in conversation, using accurate pronunciation and appropriate expressions for different intention and leading or taking part in discussion. These activities are for example information-gap, jigsaw, role playing, ranking, guessing, matching and problem-solving or discussions and debates.

There are four steps when planning speaking activities:

• Awareness-raising: Learners are encouraged to raise their awareness of certain language expressions in oral interaction in order to speak more.

• Pre-communicative: This stage allows learners to practise repeatedly a particular skill in order to speak effectively, such as language structure or intonation pattern.

• Communicative: Learners practise their speaking skills without control of the vocabulary or structures while communicating.

• Feedback: In this final stage the teacher gives learners convenient feedback.

A study by Nunan (1989) found that successful oral communication helps to improve in particular the ability to articulate intelligibly and fluently, conversational listening skills, proficiency of intonation and stress, skills in taking turns and negotiation meaning and using relevant conversational pattern (p. 32).

V. Task-based Reading

With the development of methodologies in language teaching, researchers have argued that integrating tasks in language classes increases student involvement in the language and facilitates language teaching and learning. Reading being a receptive skill is quite hard to teach as the help of productive skills like writing or speaking is needed to measure its outcome.

Reading is an active process of interpreting a message related to previous knowledge, predicting, choosing and evaluating information and applying this knowledge to new experience. In other words, reading activities enhance learners to become effective readers and to improve their knowledge of language by means of achieving new vocabulary and linguistic structures used in certain text. There are three important stages when planning task-based reading activities: pre-reading stage, while-reading stage and post-reading stage. A pre-reading discussion is suggested as it provides the learners with an opportunity to see what they know about the topic that is about to be taught and what other peers know about it as well. It facilitates as "anticipated guides which contains a series of provocative statements with an intention to challenge the students' knowledge and beliefs about the content of the passage (Dubin & Bycina, 1991, p.202). Also, vocabulary plays a significant role in the reading process and so it is very important to include the culture of vocabulary in teaching reading. Nonetheless, basic vocabulary should be taught explicitly and the students should be able to guess the meaning of the less frequent vocabulary from the context (Levine & Reves, 1990). Furthermore, the teacher can ask the students to make prediction about the

topic that they are about to learn in the classroom because it motivates them and stimulate their interest for reading. Also, video clips and pictures related to the text can be shown to the students before reading the text to help them anticipating and increase their curiosity (Mahrooqi & Roscoe, 2015, p.120). Researchers like Poorahmadi (2012) worked with Iranian EFL students and believed that TBLT was very effective in improving their reading comprehension ability. In the pre-reading stage learners provide a purpose for reading, whereas teachers can help them to set this purpose. Then, learners get general information through the introduction of a text which involves the text type and its structure, topic and background. Introduction gets learners interested in reading the text. Next, learners are asked to express the message of the text in relation to their previous experience by means of schemas which involves previewing, predicting, use of semantic maps and signpost questions.

As mentioned, while-reading stage involves breaking up the text in order to make the comprehension easier to readers and discuss shorter parts of the text. In addition, learners should analyze unknown lexical items and words before reading begins which is required for overall understanding of the text. Then, learners are practicing skimming and scanning skills which are related to the reading speed. Finally, during the while-reading stage, learners should also identify general ideas as well as supporting ideas from the text.

In the post-reading stage, teachers can use various tasks including evoking an individual response from the reader, creating the relation with other works in the same area, advising useful principles, commenting on chronological sequences and evolution of thoughts, identifying tendencies, arguments, ideas and characters, relating text content to the readers' experience, analyzing thoughts and arguments or establishing a title in order to assure readers' comprehension of a text. Besides, teachers enhance to improve learners' reading skills through creating a positive reading atmosphere, not taking into consideration a time intended for reading or designing of challenging tasks.

VI. Task-based writing

Writing is putting speech in the form of letters. It is also collection and organization of ideas and experiences. To write fluently is regarded as one of the most difficult skills for all language users (Nunan, 1989, p. 37). As stated in Nunan (1989), "writing is an extremely complex cognitive activity in which the writer is required to demonstrate control of a number of variables simultaneously" (as cited in Bell & Burnaby, 1984). Nunan (1989) adds that this involves control of the sentence content, structure, format, vocabulary, spelling and punctuation, whereas the writer must be able to organize information into cohesive and coherent text (as cited in Bell & Burnaby, 1984). The role of the teacher in developing learner's writing skills is to design and interpret appropriate tasks, encourage learners to be innovative in writing, give them enough time and motivate them to better results. Furthermore, teachers should be flexible and sensitive, create comfortable atmosphere and take into consideration different levels and needs of their learners.

There are many different ways of practicing writing skills; either focusing on the process of writing or on the product of writing. When concentrating on the product, teachers are only interested in the aim of a task and in the end product. Therefore, many educators prefer to focus on the process of writing going through a number of stages in order to practice various language skills. Furthermore, learners can discuss every single stage with teachers and concentrate on the producing of final version of their work. Activities connected with the process of writing may involve discussion, brainstorming and collecting ideas, research, language study, drafting, editing and also frequent interaction between teachers and learners and between the learners themselves.

There are four main learning strategies used in writing: pre-writing, drafting, revising and editing stage. In the pre-writing stage learners begin with generating ideas which involves strategies such as brainstorming, free writing, questioning, role-play, interview and reading with listening. During the pre-writing stage learners also plan their ideas including recognizing purposes and audience in the writing context and creating outlines of their writing.

In the drafting stage learners concentrate primarily on the content than on grammar, punctuation or spelling. Here, the teacher's role is merely as a facilitator who helps and motivates the students in improving their writing skill. Teachers prepare learners for the drafting stage and help them to develop their skills in creating beginning, ending and the content of the text. Learners consider the relation of the opening to the ending and examine examples of interesting openings, such as rhetorical question or an assertive statement. Moreover, teachers enhance learners in structuring a text which is realized by practicing suitable reading activities, writing full texts, paragraphing, creating summaries or using cohesive devices. In English language, basic grammatical patters could be made necessary for communication. In doing so, students are engaged in activities which require those basic grammatical patterns to express their feelings and negotiate information. Creative writing involves imaginative tasks where learners use their own experiences and which encourages them to produce a greater piece of writing

In the revising stage, learners are motivated to make necessary changes in their drafts per peer feedback which allows them to work interactively in pairs and comment on each other's drafts. Then, the teacher leads a discussion in small groups and comments on the drafts by providing positive support, asking questions and suggesting possible improvements.

The last editing stage deals with the final revision of grammar, punctuation, spelling and handwriting in order to enable learners to present their texts to the readers. Teachers can also explain to the learners certain grammatical points they have problems with. Nunan (1989) provides that a successful writing includes comprehending the mechanics of letter formation together with correct spelling and punctuation, using grammatical rules in order to transform the meaning, forming content through paragraph and the whole text to analyze given and new information, correcting and improving

writer's initial achievement and choosing a suitable style for the audience (p. 37).

VII. Conclusion

Designing and using task based activities in the classroom introduces a modern and effective approach in language learning and should be definitely included in English lessons. With careful reflection and planning, any teacher can implement the language skills and strengthen the tapestry of TBLT. When the tapestry is woven well, learners can use English effectively.

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