

The Strengths And Weaknesses Of Task Based Language Teaching

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Abstract

Task based language learning approach targeted at developing the cognitive as well as the communicative skills of language learners and so the language teachers, researchers, textbook writers and course designers received the approach as cognitive skills play a vital role in today's competitive atmosphere. The task based approach aims at providing opportunities for learners to experiment with and explore both spoken and written language through learning activities that are designed to engage learners in the authentic practical and functional use of language for meaningful purposes. Learners are encouraged to activate and use whatever language they already have in the process of completing a task. In order to suit to the demand of the day the text book publishers started labelling text books as task based. Syllabus designers started claiming that their syllabus is based on task based learning, though some of them are not aware of the difference between task-supported learning and task based learning. The present paper seeks to study and present the strengths and weaknesses of Task based learning approach. The task definition, the issues that contributed to the task based revolution and, the different types of tasks that are used in a language classroom are also discussed.

Keywords: Task based learning (TBL) approach, communicative language teaching (CLT), Tasks

1. Introduction:

The importance of Task based learning in the existing milieu is obvious from the various recent publications made in the field of task- based learning and teaching. Task based approach focuses on communication and conveying message. It gives secondary importance to the forms used (Ellis, 2009). "A task is an activity which requires learners to use language, with emphasis on meaning, to attain an objective". (Bygate, Skehan & Swain, 2001, as cited in Ellis, (2009, pg 5). A task is said to be a classroom activity which is objective and interactive. Which aims at comprehension and production of target language as the learners perform some set of work plans (Lee, 2000, as cited by Ellis 2009). Tasks involve learners in 'comprehending, manipulating, producing or interpreting in the target language' (Nunan, 1989 as cited in Ellis 2003 pg7). There is a cognitive as well as a linguistic dimension to a task. The actual objective of a task is not that the learners should arrive at a successful outcome but that they should use language in ways which improve language learning. Tasks are activities which aim at meaning-focused language use. Therefore a task boosts the participants to function as 'language users' rather than 'language learners' using communicative processes as those incorporated in real world activities. "Tasks involve cognitive processes such as selecting, reasoning, classifying, sequencing information, and transforming information from one form of representation to another" (Ellis, 2009 pg 7).

Task based learning therefore aims at developing the cognitive as well as the communicative skills of language learners.

2. Factors that contributed to Task-based revolution:

The primary factor that contributed to Task-based revolution is the identification of the fact that pair work and group work enable the learners to take part in intensive verbal interaction unlike a teacher fronted interaction. Secondly pair work and group work function as an alternative to individual work. The learners get a chance to work in cooperation and coordination, and that will lift their spirit and push the learners forward. Thirdly the features of a target language are not assimilated in natural oral context.

Based on the way tasks are incorporated two types language teaching have emerged. The first one is task-supported language teaching where tasks are incorporated into traditional language based approaches to teaching. It uses the weak version of CLT which uses tasks as a means of providing practice for language items like structures and grammatical features. It employs Present-practice-produce and it is in the production stage that tasks are used. Second language research shows that learners do not acquire language in this manner and this approach is criticized on many grounds. The second one is the task-based language teaching where the strong version of CLT is employed. In this case tasks are considered as units of teaching and complete courses are designed around the tasks and they form the basis for an entire language curriculum. It gives importance to communication rather than for grammar and fluency rather than accuracy. A task is executed in three stages Pre task where unfamiliar vocabulary or structures are explained, during the task where some help is provided if necessary and post task where the language items are revised.

3. Different types of tasks:

Focused tasks are designed in such a way that the learners grasp the targeted feature. They focus on form while implementing the task. Listening tasks can be devised this way where a specific feature of language is presented to the learners. Listening tasks can also be considered as non-reciprocal tasks. Reciprocal tasks are the ones that require the learners to interact or in other words reciprocate. Focused tasks are designed in three major ways

1) Structure-based production tasks: Structure-based production tasks are designed to elicit a particular target language feature or structure. For instance in tasks like Picture difference, picture sequencing, picture drawing etc. Question forms are elicited. Tasks like exchanging travel itinerary, the simple present tense or future tense are elicited.

2) Comprehension tasks: comprehension tasks are based on the assumption that language acquisition takes place as a result of input-processing. The learners are required to pay conscious attention and notice the linguistic form that is presented as input and based on the responses made by the learner in the input phase a task is given.

3) Consciousness-raising tasks: Consciousness raising tasks are designed to cater to explicit learning. They are meant to develop awareness at the level of understanding and not merely noticing. The learners are required to talk about language, they are asked to frame their own grammar rules.

Unfocused tasks are based on a theory which says that learning is an implicit process which cannot be influenced directly through instruction. According to the theory of implicit learning, practice must involve learners in authentic communicative activity and is based on the strong version of communicative language teaching (Howatt, 1984 as cited in Ellis 2009). Studies claim that structured tasks and tasks based on familiar information tend to produce higher accuracy and tasks which push learners to reach a justified conclusion tend to produce more advanced language. Studies also show that if planning time is given to learners before actually taking part in the task, it leads to greater complexity and giving learners a post- task activity after an interactive task, like asking them to write about their own performance leads to greater accuracy (Skehan, 2002).

The use of tasks will give a clear and purposeful context for the teaching and learning of grammar and other language features as well as skills.... All in all the role of task- based learning is to stimulate a natural desire in learners to improve their language competence by challenging them to complete meaningful tasks” (CDC 1999:41 as cited in Nunan 2004 pg 13,14).Because of pronouncements like this task- based language learning has become popular.

4) Strengths of TBL approach:

Task based language learning offers a lot of advantages as it is communication based and allows the learners to transfer previously acquired knowledge to new communicative contexts (Nunan,1989).It encourages the learner to emerge as a language user. It intends to engage the language learner in a meaning focused language usage (Breen 1989 as cited in Ellis, 2009).

a) Task based learning helps learners to interact spontaneously: Learners are free to use whatever vocabulary and grammar they know. For instance a role play requires the learner to use language freely. It gives learners chance to try out what ever language they already know and it also gives learners a chance to notice and benefit from others expressions and thereby builds their level of confidence gradually. The cognitive competence as well as the communicative competence of the learners is developed as they perform a task. Learners’ attention is drawn towards problem solving instead of focusing on isolated language structures. It encourages the learners to be more ambitious.

b) Automaticity for language learning is defined as a more efficient, more accurate and more stable performance. (segadowitz,2003 as cited in Rider, I .et al 2007). It is also argued that automaticity leads to near native performance. Research in the fields of cognitive psychology and second language acquisition suggests that automaticity is achieved by using language rules in a creative manner in an authentic communication situation (Dekeyser, 2003 as cited in Rider et al 2007). Task based language learning paves way for automaticity. Cognitive theories of language suggest that practicing in real life situations is helpful in achieving automaticity of linguistic knowledge (Johnson, 1988 as cited in Ellis, 2009).

c) Task based learning gives language learners’ opportunity to learn vocabulary. Usually teachers explain vocabulary in a pre-task and learners are not involved, words taught that way are easily forgotten so it is beneficial for the students if the teacher thinks of creative ways to involve students in the pre-task. Some of the options suggested for improving vocabulary are predicting words related to the task title or topic, and building words into a word web by way of brainstorm, cooperative dictionary search and by matching list of words with a list of definitions (Newton, 2001). While performing the task a glossary helps but it is observed that it does not

allow the learner to practice vocabulary and therefore such words are not retained whereas words inferred through active processing were learnt better (Hulstijn, 1992, as cited by Newton, 2001). An interactive glossary is better than a marginal glossary. Interactive glossary is where the learners interact. The teacher needs to put in extra effort in preparing an interactive glossary. It is also worthwhile to encourage learners to negotiate meaning of new instead of relying on an external source. Though the question on the quality of vocabulary gained through group work occurs, it is observed that learners made impressive progress. It is also claimed that vocabulary learning occurs incidentally as learners take part in cooperative task based interaction. After performing the task if the learners are encouraged to keep a record of new words and revise those words and also if they analyse the new words in different contexts and in different ways it will reinforce their learning of vocabulary. "The teacher needs to ensure that, through tasks learners are given opportunities to meet and explore new vocabulary without direct teacher assistance, and to use this vocabulary to meet meaningful task goals (Newton, 2001).

d) TBLT provides essential conditions for language learning: Language learning does not happen without motivation exposure, and opportunities to use the language. Task based language learning encourages learners to use language purposefully and in cooperation. Learners get a chance to negotiate turns to speak and also try out various communication strategies. Task based learning creates conditions which enhance language learning spontaneously. It prepares learners to use language in the real world (Andon, 2010).

e) Maximises scope for communication: Task based learning provides conditions that allow learners to assimilate what they notice and understand while performing the task. By participating in the task learners not only acquire new language items, but also make use of language they have acquired recently. Tasks allow learners to acquire and assimilate language items that they readily notice and understand. It allows the learners to transfer their previously acquired knowledge creatively to new contexts of communication. It engages learners in purposeful communication and gives chances to learners to try out various communication strategies and equips the learners with language for public use.

f) Experiential learning: Experiential learning is said to form an important conceptual basis for task-based language teaching. The learners' immediate personal experience is taken as the starting point in this approach. It is argued that intellectual growth occurs as learners take part and reflect on the sequences of the tasks. The active involvement is considered central to this approach and therefore the approach is learner centred. It is in contrast with the transmission approach of education in which the learner acquires knowledge passively from the teacher. Experiential learning has diverse roots in different disciplines. Psychologist David Kolbe pulled the diverse strands together from social psychology, humanistic education, developmental education and cognitive theory (Nunan, 2004).

5) Weaknesses of TBL approach:

a) Task Difficulty: Although the difficulty of a task can be estimated from the performance of learners, the factors that actually contribute to task difficulty are studied so that it is useful to integrate and sequence the tasks in language teaching syllabus. "The cognitive load and clarity of the goal of the task, code complexity and interpretive density of the language to be used were some of the criteria considered in establishing the level of difficulty of a task" (Candlin, 1987 as cited in Tavakoli, 2009). Task difficulty is also defined in terms of i) code complexity which

includes vocabulary load, redundancy and density. ii) Communicative stress which comprises of time limits, time pressure, speed, number of participants. iii) cognitive complexity which consists of cognitive familiarity comprising of familiarity of the topic, familiarity of the discourse genre and familiarity of the task itself and cognitive processing which includes information clarity and sufficiency of information given (Skehan, 1998 as cited in Tavakoli 2009). It is argued that static tasks like describing a diagram where the elements of the task remained constant were easier than dynamic tasks like story telling where the elements changed. Abstract tasks like expressing an opinion where the elements of the task were not concrete were reported to be more difficult. Nunan and Keobke (1995) carried out a study with 35 undergraduate students by using various reading, listening and speaking tasks and asked the students how difficult the tasks were and why. The learners in the study pointed out that lack of familiarity with task types, confusion over the purpose of the task and the impact and extent of cultural knowledge are the predominant factors that cause Task difficulty.

b) Mismatch between the learners' and teachers' perception: Studies indicate that the same classroom event is often interpreted differently by the teachers and learners (Kumaravadivelu, 2003). The learners identified the following factors for task difficulty

i) Cognitive demand: Difficulty in understanding the task, requiring more time or more attention and resources.

ii) Linguistic demand: vocabulary or structures the learners did not know.

iii) Clarity of pictures / story: Visual clarity and conceptual transparency without ambiguity.

iv) Amount of information: Both an overload of information and a paucity of information were undesired.

v) Task structure: The way information was organised.

vi) Affective factors: Liking a picture story or being able to relate to it would make it more enjoyable, if not easier.

Whereas on the other hand teachers attributed age, gender, cultural background and the level of language proficiency as factors that affect the task performance of the learners. Some of the teachers considered the presence or absence of background information in a picture story as a factor that influences the task performance of the learners (Tavakoli, 2009). Studies show that teachers and learners interpret the same classroom event differently. There is a mismatch between what the teacher instructs and what the learners perceive. It indicates that there is a problem in the language teaching and learning process. This can increase the gap between 'input and the learner intake' (Kumaravadivelu, 2003).

c) Authenticity of tasks: When we look at the definitions of a task, some of them suggest that a task has to be a real world activity. But there are tasks like describing a picture to someone else so that they can draw the picture, identifying the differences between two pictures, telling a story based on pictures etc. which are unlikely to occur in real life situations. Though the authenticity of such tasks is questioned by some, it is argued that the interaction that takes place while performing these tasks is useful while performing real world tasks. It is said that they manifest some sort of relationship to the real world and seek to achieve interactional authenticity if not situational authenticity (Skehan, 1996a as cited in Ellis, 2003). A simplified version of the task can help the learner to cope with current communication and also long term language development (Guariento, W & Morley, J. 2001).

d) Outcome: one of the characteristic features of a task is that it results in a clear outcome. 'A specified objective' is an essential feature of a task (Crookes, 1986, as cited in Ellis, 2003). But many a times it is possible to achieve a successful outcome of a task without actually achieving the aim of task. For instance in tasks like spotting the differences between pictures the learners may complete the task without using any language. At times there may not be any pedagogic importance to the outcome of task, what matters is the linguistic and cognitive processes involved in the task. The learning outcome of any given task depends on three main factors, namely the contribution of individual learner, the task itself and the situation in which the task is performed. This indicates that a pre-designed task is bound to change based on the way the learner handles it. The outcome of the task may not be consistent with the aims and objectives with which the task is designed. Breen, 1989 goes to the extent of saying that "learners are capable of playing havoc with even the most carefully designed task" (as cited in Murphy, 2003).

e) Linguistic deficiency: Learners who are beginners with no linguistic resources find it very difficult to take part in a task. Especially in speaking tasks like role play or describing the differences learners may find it very challenging and strenuous to continue the conversation. They may not understand what the task demands and they may find it hard to make themselves understood while taking part in the task. Ultimately the learner might be de motivated to perform the task and may even lose confidence in himself / herself.

f) Learners' perception: The learner purposes are said to be distributed on a continuum between achievement orientation and survival orientation. If the learner perceives that a task is related closely to his/her needs, they tend to adopt an achievement orientation. Whereas on the other hand if they do not perceive the relevance of the task they adopt survival orientation and put in minimal effort and use the simplest strategy to perform the task.(Breen, 1989 as cited in Murphy, 2003) .

g) Learners' needs neglected: Most of the language learners have specific needs. People learn a second language or foreign language, so that it is of some use to them. A new language is learnt for a variety of reasons and not all learners need the same kind of tasks. One particular task may interest a few learners belonging to a particular gender or cultural background, but it may not be of interest to the others. For instance a recipe of Apple pie may interest some learners but all may not be interested in it. The learners go through the trouble in order to reach a certain goal. But very often learners' language learning needs are neglected (Branden, 2006).

h) Diverse classes: A class consists of learners with different talents, learning styles and motivation levels. Therefore the tasks prescribed may be relevant for a few learners and for others it may be too difficult and for some others it may be too easy and they may feel that it is a waste of time to perform the task (Skehan, 2002). It is difficult to cater to learners with different levels of previous knowledge at the same time. Learners with low level of knowledge might find the tasks too ambitious and at the same time learners high level of understanding might find the tasks too easy and boring. Research shows that the varied interpretation of the same task by the learners frustrates the teacher (Wang 1996 as cited in Ellis, 2003). It becomes difficult for the teacher to monitor the tasks performed by the learners at the same time whether it is pair work or group work. It is also noted that natural communication does not take place in most of the tasks, it is said that learners carry out 'speaking for the sake of speaking'. The reaction of the learners towards the tasks is said to be very different some learners try to make the interaction more

genuine by taking part in their roles properly while some learners take part in the task quite mechanically. (Coughlan & Duff, 1994 as cited in Ellis, 2009).

i) Fundamental issues unresolved: Tasks as core activities do not seem to resolve the fundamental issues of language expansion or the correctness of language used. The open-ended oral pair work and group work tasks only seem to improve oral production fluency. Immediate assimilation of the unfamiliar language features introduced in the pre-task phase is also unlikely. Involving all the learners in a task becomes problematic in a heterogeneous class and also when the task is inappropriate to the learners (Littlewood, 2004). Though learners do not like to focus on form studies suggest that form should be supported in some way. It is often argued that learners acquire fluency at the expense of accuracy. Critics are of the opinion that it is difficult to implement. Since it is not a teacher-centered approach, it demands individual or group responsibility and commitment on the part of the learners.

j) Theoretical objections to task based learning:

i) The restricted nature of task based learning: This critique does not completely dismiss task based teaching but points at the limitations that are inherent. Six prominent functions of a language are cited in article namely 1) Referential function in which language is used to convey information. 2) Emotive function where language is used to express feelings. 3) Connotative function where language is used to influence the actions of another person. 4) Phatic function where language is used to establish, discontinue or prolong communication or check whether it took place or not. 5) Meta-lingual function where language is used to communicate about the language code. 6) Poetic function where language is used to draw attention to the form (Jacobson, 1960 as cited in Ellis, 2009). Ellis argues that most of the tasks are referential in nature, Role-play tasks can be designed to impart the emotive function and tasks like describing a picture perform the connotative function. Consciousness-raising tasks are based on the meta-lingual function. All the tasks include phatic function to some extent. But the poetic function is totally neglected. It is pointed out that though tasks try to bring out communication strategies there are inherent limitations like it focuses only on rational and transactional and neglects the imaginative and playful aspects of communication. It is felt that the playful aspects should also be taken into consideration not that they should be central (Cook, 2000 as cited in Ellis 2009).

ii) Cultural relativity of task-based teaching: This critique is socio-political in nature. It refers to the cultural and contextual constraints that are problematic in implementing task-based learning. It is argued that “The content of many of the tasks that figure in both research and language teaching materials implicitly espouse the cultural values and norms of the western English-speaking world” (Ellis, 2009). It is observed that the classroom practices used in Task-based teaching and the examples given are all culturally loaded. Some of the tasks are said to be inappropriate in the non-western world. As a form of teaching task based teaching is in conflict with cultural contexts like in China where learning is not perceived as a collaborative and experimental activity and for them benevolence and respect to the teacher student relationship is considered important.

iii) Teaching language as communication: This critique attacks the core principle on which Task-based learning is based on. It is argued that tasks merely engage learners in communication and they do not teach communication, based on the assumption that by engaging learners in communication, the learners automatically develop communicative competence.

6) Conclusion:

A whole lot of techniques, methods and approaches have been in vogue in the field of second language teaching but every method and approach has its own advantages and disadvantages, and so is the case with task based learning approach. One should try to make the fullest use of the strengths and minimise the weaknesses to the possible extent. A lot of research has been done in the area of task-based learning and various techniques are suggested to improve vocabulary, automaticity of learning and ultimately the performance of learners in developing their language abilities. Research also focused on designing of task based syllabus, assessing the role of tasks in second language acquisition, task complexity, cognitive aspects, teachers' perception of task difficulty and learners' perception of task difficulty, authenticity of tasks, interaction between tasks and learners. Further research can be done on broader aspects like implementing task based learning in big classes, catering to the needs of diverse groups of learners, effective ways for the execution of tasks.

The role of a teacher is significant in preparing the learners for task performance, for instance pre-teaching vocabulary and grammatical structures, motivating the learners etc. For any method to succeed teachers need to be highly creative and innovative in involving the learners and be in a position to take initiative to arouse the interest of the learners. When the teacher is talented, the opportunities for learning are maximised. So the teacher should grab every opportunity to enhance the performance of the learners and equip them to use language in future in the real world situations. Every effort should be put in for the well execution of the task. The onus also lies on teacher trainees and in-service inspectors to improve the performance of the learners. The researchers, teachers, the curriculum development authorities, course designers and all those who are responsible should think of ways to promote language learning instead of trying to judge one method as the best. There is no single best method or a one size fits all kind of a pattern to teach language. Language acquisition takes place spontaneously in different ways in different learners. It can be suggested that conditions suitable for the right amount of exposure, motivation and opportunities to use the language are to be provided.

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