

The Importance of Task-Based Approach in Language Learning

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Annotation. This article deals with the problems of innovative ways of teaching English. It studies the importance of task-based approach and characteristic features of this teaching method.

Key words: contemporary methods. Validity, acquisition, productive or receptive skills, task-based approach.

Innovation in foreign language teaching began in the 19th century and became very rapid in the 20th century. It led to a number of different and sometimes conflicting methods, each claiming to be a major improvement over the previous or contemporary methods. The earliest applied linguists included Jean Manes ca, Heinrich Gottfried Ollendorff (1803–1865), Henry Sweet (1845–1912), Otto Jespersen (1860–1943), and Harold Palmer (1877–1949). They worked on setting language teaching principles and approaches based on linguistic and psychological theories, but they left many of the specific practical details for others to devise.

The history of foreign-language education in the 20th century and the methods of teaching (such as those related below) might appear to be a history of failure. Very few students in U.S. universities who have a foreign language as a major attain "minimum professional proficiency". Even the "reading knowledge" required for a PhD degree is comparable only to what second-year language students read, and only very few researchers who are native English speakers can read and assess information written in languages other than English. Even a number of famous linguists are monolingual.

However, anecdotal evidence for successful second or foreign language learning is easy to find, leading to a discrepancy between these cases and the failure of most language programs. This tends to make the research of second language acquisition emotionally charged. Older methods and approaches such as the grammar translation method and the direct method are dismissed and even ridiculed, as newer methods and approaches are invented and promoted as the only and complete solution to the problem of the high failure rates of foreign language students.

Most books on language teaching list the various methods that have been used in the past, often ending with the author's new method. These new methods are usually presented as coming only from the author's mind, as the authors generally give no credence to what was done before and do not explain how it relates to the new method. For example, descriptive linguists who seem to claim unhesitatingly that there were no scientifically based language teaching methods before their work (which led to the audio-lingual method developed for the U.S. Army in World War II). However, there is significant evidence to the contrary. It is also often inferred or even stated that older methods were completely ineffective or have died out completely, though in reality even the oldest methods are still in use (e.g. the Berlitz version of the direct method). Proponents of new methods have been so sure that their ideas are so new and so correct that they could not conceive that the older ones have enough validity to cause controversy. This was in turn caused by emphasis on new scientific advances, which has tended to blind researchers to precedents in older work.

There have been two major branches in the field of language learning, the empirical and theoretical, and these have almost completely separate histories, with each gaining ground over the other at one time or another. Examples of researchers on the empiricist side are Jespersen, Palmer, and Leonard Bloomfield, who promote mimicry and memorization with pattern drills. These methods follow from the basic empiricist position that language acquisition results from habits formed by conditioning and drilling. In its most extreme form, language learning is seen as much

the same as any other learning in any other species, human language being essentially the same as communication behaviors seen in other species.

On the theoretical side are, for example, Francois Gouin, M.D. Berlitz, and Emile B. De Sauzé, whose rationalist theories of language acquisition dovetail with linguistic work done by Noam Chomsky and others. These have led to a wider variety of teaching methods, ranging from the grammar-translation method and Gouin's "series method" to the direct methods of Berlitz and De Sauzé. With these methods, students generate original and meaningful sentences to gain a functional knowledge of the rules of grammar. This follows from the rationalist position that man is born to think and that language use is a uniquely human trait impossible in other species. Given that human languages share many common traits, the idea is that humans share a universal grammar which is built into our brain structure. This allows us to create sentences that we have never heard before but that can still be immediately understood by anyone who understands the specific language being spoken. The rivalry between the two camps is intense, with little communication or cooperation between them.

Over time, language education has developed in schools and has become a part of the education curriculum around the world. In some countries, such as the United States, language education (also referred to as World Languages) has become a core subject along with main subjects such as English, Maths and Science.

Language learning has taken a new shape in Task-based approach. To the students who had learned language focussing on drills and grammatical forms, this approach may pose a challenge. But task-based learning according to Wills (1996) is a "goal-oriented communicative activity with a specific outcome, where emphasis is on exchanging meanings and not producing specific language forms.' The tasks are differentiated as real-world or target tasks and pedagogical tasks, that occur in the classroom. When a real world situation is transformed into the classroom, tasks become pedagogic in nature. Richards(1986) feels that the use of a variety of different kinds of tasks in language teaching is said to make language teaching more communicative. According to Breen (1987), Task refers to a range of work plans which have the overall purposes of facilitating language learning. The learning principle underlying the task-based approach is that learners will learn best if they are engaged in activities that have interactional authenticity, that is to make them use language in way that closely resemble how language naturally occurs outside the classroom. The characteristics of a task according to Ellis (2003) are that

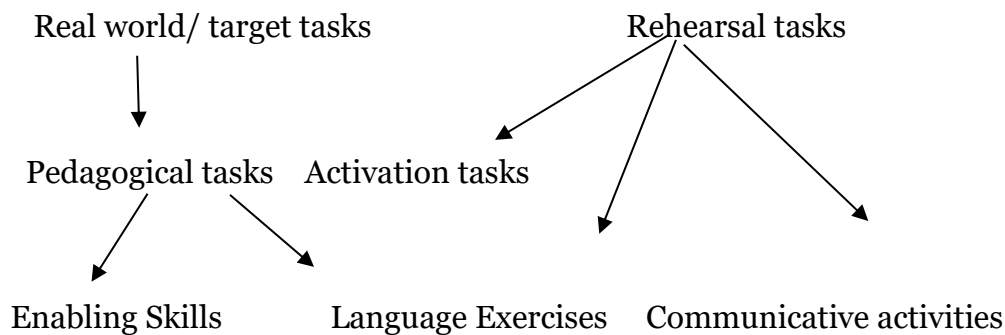
- meaning is primary
- there is an outcome
- learners have the freedom to make use of their own linguistic resources, although the design of the task may predispose them to choose particular forms
- the language use in the tasks resembles the way language is used in the real world
- the task may engage in productive or receptive skills

The students use the target language for communicative purpose in order to achieve an outcome. The students are involved in an activity which is intended to provide an opportunity to develop creative language use, instead of reproducing and manipulating language models provided by the teacher or textbook. The students are doing something which they may do outside the classroom in the outside world. Nunan (2004) feels that the task-based language teaching has strengthened the following principles and practices;

- A needs-based approach to content selection
- An emphasis on learning to communicate through interaction in the target language
- The introduction of authentic texts into the learning situation
- Provision of opportunities for learners to focus not only on language but also on the learning process
- An enhancement of the learner's own personal experience as important contributing elements to classroom learning
- The linking of classroom language learning with language use outside the classroom.

This is the basis for a learner-centered classroom in which the learners are involved in their own learning process and they have to do the learning for themselves. The philosophy of learner-centeredness has strong links with experiential learning, humanistic psychology and task-based language teaching. (Nunan, 2001) All the above activities are done within the framework of language learning.

The framework for task-based learning (TBLT) can be represented in the following way;



A real-world task is modified into a pedagogical task. But all pedagogical tasks may not have clear relationship to the real world. The tasks are designed to activate their language skills. In the process, the students indulge in communicative activities and employ various skills of language like initiation, assertion and negotiation, persuasion, critical thinking and finally language production. At these times, the students move from reproductive language use to creative language use when they combine familiar words and expressions in novel ways. The students have the opportunities to rehearse the tasks and also activate their prior knowledge and language till the process is achieved. So emphasis is on the process of learning rather than on the product. Whether it is the product or the process, the approach has to have curricular considerations and the syllabus design.

Curricular considerations:

The crucial problem underlying the TBL is the formulating of a suitable curriculum. The curriculum consists of three elements i) syllabus design, which is selecting, sequencing and justifying content ii) methodology, which is concerned with selecting, sequencing and justifying learning experiences and iii) assessment, which is concerned with selection of evaluation instruments and procedures. But in TBL, emphasis had been on the assessment of the learner needs and the end result, the product of an instructional program and so a functional-notional syllabus based on needs assessment is launched. The designer has to give priority to the changing process of learning and the potential of a classroom and select the task components.

Syllabus design:

The tasks are selected and arranged in the text book in a helpful way. Gradation may be based on the complexity of an item, its frequency in written or spoken English or its importance for the learner. The following learner factors are to be considered while the tasks are designed.

- i) Confidence - Does the learner have the necessary level of confidence?
- ii) Motivation - How motivating is the task?
- iii) Prior learning experience – Does the learner’s prior experience provide the necessary learning skills?
- iv) Observed ability – What is the learner’s assessed ability in the skills concerned?
- v) Cultural knowledge- Does the task assume cultural knowledge? If so can the learner be expected to have it?
- vi) Linguistic knowledge- How much linguistic knowledge does the learner have?

Sequencing:

With the increasing use of authentic texts, the trend has been to control difficulty, not by simplifying the input data but by varying the difficulty level of the procedures.

- i) Relevance – Is the task meaningful and relevant to the learner?
- ii) Complexity- How complex are the instructions? What cognitive demands does the task make on the reader?
- iii) Amount of content provided prior to the task- How much prior knowledge of the world or cultural context is assumed when the task is framed?
- iv) Processibility of language of the task- Is the language that learners are expected to produce in line with their processing capacity?
- v) Amount of help needed- How much assistance can the learner get from the teacher?
- vi) Degree of grammatical complexity- How standard does the task require accuracy/ fluency in the learners?
- vii) Time available- How long does the learner have to carry out the task?
- viii) Follow up- Is there some kind of follow-up providing debriefing and feedback?

Methodology:

The task can be prepared keeping in mind the Beginner, Pre-intermediate and the High – intermediate. They can be also in phases like i) Processing ii) Productive iii) Interactive. A beginner can be introduced to the Processing phase when they have to read or listen to a passage and give a non-verbal or verbal response. The Pre-intermediate stage can be given tasks like Listen to cues and complete a table or give a meaningful response. It is the Interactive phase the students should be led into. The high intermediate learners are made to be involved in Role play, Small group discussions leading to problem solving. The underlying principle is that the students should be made to be actively involved in all phases of the learning process. The choice of content should be relevant to students' lives, interests and academic goals. There should be an integrated skills approach involving all four skills as well as grammar and vocabulary. This reflects what happens in the real world, where interactions involve multiple skills simultaneously.

Assessment:

Task based language teaching presents challenges in all areas of the curriculum especially in the area of assessment. Task based learning has to be assessed using traditional methods. Norris et al (1998) quoted by Nunan argues that task based testing is part of a broader approach to assessment. He develops a set of test specifications for designing and grading tasks. There are four factors to be considered; code, cognitive complexity, communicative demand and overlapping variables. The test can combine testing of all language skills and soft skills which are essential life skills. The students should be motivated to go for self assessment and could be encouraged to make entries in diaries to assess their language learning progress through the course. The composition of the task should direct the students towards achieving the four factors.

Task Components:

Littlewood (1981) argues that the skills have to be taken into consideration, emphasising the point that language learning is development of the various skills. The learner should be able to express his/her intended message. The learner must be able to distinguish between the forms he has mastered as part of his linguistic competence and the communicative functions which they perform. The designers have to provide opportunities for students to follow experimental learning. The learners are actively engaged in and reflect on the sequence of tasks wherein there is an intellectual growth. Learners should be able to move from what they know and incorporate new knowledge and skill. The goal is to enable the learner to become self-directed and responsible for his or her own learning. This process leads to a gradual shift of the initiative taken by the learner, encouraging him or her to bring in personal contributions and experiences. Instead of the teacher setting the tasks and standards of acceptable performance, the learner is in charge of his or her own learning. The

role of task-based language learning is to stimulate a natural desire in learners to improve their language competence by challenging them to complete meaningful tasks. So how could the students be helped to follow the instructional sequence in completing the task.

A six-step instructional sequence;

1. Schema building: A task should be created in such a way that the students would be able to apply their past experience to guide their learning and action.
2. Controlled practice: the setting of the task and the guidelines to complete are provided by the teacher.
3. Authentic practice: The students get involved in the task and in the practice session they use a lot of language.
4. Focus on linguistic elements: The students may use nouns, adjectives, question forms, expressions and transactions when they are trying to complete the task.
5. Provide freer practice: The students have the liberty to practice with words and structures while negotiating the task.
6. Introduce the pedagogical task: The real world task is now converted into a pedagogical task.

A task can be successful only if the students develop a right attitude towards it. Brindley (1987), as quoted by Nunan, suggests that in addition to the background knowledge or schema, the teacher should be able to induce confidence, motivation, prior learning experience, learning pace, ability of the language skills, cultural and linguistic knowledge. Based on the above guidelines, a task has been designed for tertiary level students.

Traditional learning environments (for example, grammar translation and audio-lingual) are those where the language is taught to a group of foreign or second language learners. In such cases, the focus is on the language itself, rather than on the information carried out by the language or the way it is processed and used. The teacher's aim is to assure that students learn the new vocabulary and grammatical rules of the new language.

According to Lightbrown and Spada (1999), however, communicative and task-based instructional environments involve goals that put the emphasis on interaction, conversation, and language use, not learning language itself. Task-based language learning is an approach of language learning that involves doing a familiar task by using the target language. As these are familiar tasks, there is a large range of task possibilities; for example, visiting the doctor, conducting an interview, or calling customer services for help. Teachers in a wide range of settings are eager and obedient to what the curriculum leaders tell them about how they should teach, and the publishers almost everywhere describe their course books as task-based. This caused Littlewood (2004) argue that "the task-based approach has achieved something of the new orthodoxy" (p.319).

Task-based learning was first developed by N. Prabhu in Bangalore, southern India. Prabhu believed that students may learn more effectively when their minds are focused on the task, rather than on the language they are using (Prabhu, 1987; as cited in Littlewood, 2004)

Nunan (2006) defines task as a piece of classroom work involving learners in a understanding, directing, producing or interacting way in the target language while the students' attention is focused on activating their grammatical knowledge in order to express meaning, and in which the aim is to express meaning rather than to manipulate form. The task should also have a sense of wholeness, being able to stand alone as a communicative act in its own right with a beginning, middle and an end.

The topics discussed in communicative and task-based environments are generally topics of general interest to the learner. Task-based learning involves those instructions in which classroom activities are tasks similar to those which learners may engage in outside the second language classroom. Tasks may be complex, for example, creating a school newspaper or easier such as making a hotel reservation (Lightbrown and Spada, 1999).

Brown (2001) assumes that in task-based instruction, the main concern is not the small pieces of language, but rather the practical purposes for which language must be used. Whereas content based instruction focuses on subject matter content, task-based instruction focuses on a whole set

of real-world tasks. And input for tasks may come from different sources such as speeches, conversations, narratives, public announcements, cartoon strips, interviews, oral descriptions, etc. He also states that task-based curricula are different from content-based, theme-based, and experiential instruction in that the course objectives are more language based. While in task-based instruction the focus is on communication, purpose and meaning, the goals are linguistics in nature. These goals are not in the traditional sense of just focusing on grammar or phonology, but they include preserving the centrality of functions like greeting, expressing opinions as well.

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