Tenth Week:
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Task-Based Approach to Language Teaching

The past decade has witnessed the advent of task-based instructional approaches in different names including problem-based learning, situated learning and case-based learning. Though varied in names, they all seem to have one thing in common; they get learners involved with tasks or problems as contrasted with more traditional topic-centered curriculum approaches. (Merrill, 2007). Proponents of task-based learning believe that learners involved with real-world problems form appropriate schema and mental models as they collaboratively solve problems and reflect on their experience. Task-based instructional approaches have been widely adopted across a wide variety of discipline areas including medical training, social work, design, and language learning. This paper will discuss the implication of the task-based approach to second language learning where the method has been increasingly adopted and tried in many language classrooms across the world in the recent past. In this paper, the impact of task-based language learning will be explored with special regard to adult learners whose distinctive characteristics make task-based approaches more plausible and beneficial.

Task-based instruction is a small, yet fast growing, trend in contemporary second language teaching. To give an example, the ERIC database shows over 120 articles on this issue since the beginning of this millennium. In order to discuss task-based learning properly, it is important to understand what the term 'task' means. Task has been defined by various researchers including Nunan (2004) who wrote that "a task is a piece of classroom work that involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language" (p.9). Earlier than Nunan, Jane Willis (1996) defined task as "an activity where the target language is used by the learner for a communicative purpose (goal) in order to achieve an outcome" (p.23). While definitions vary somewhat among scholars, they all emphasize that pedagogical task involves "communicative language use where users' attention is focused on meaning rather than grammatical form" (Nunan, 2006, p.17).

Stemming from the constructivist theory of learning, task-based instruction has emerged in response to the limitations of the traditional PPP (presentation, practice and performance) paradigm (Ellis, 2003). While the PPP approach is relatively straightforward and well-structured to be easily understood by both students and beginner teachers, it has also been criticized considerably for the characteristic that it is far too teacher-oriented and over controlled. Furthermore, the trend of globalization has urged educators and governments to improve communicative competence among second language learners, and the PPP approach has not been effective in fulfilling the mission. Short, Harste & Burke argued that the behaviorist PPP approach in language instruction has been to set up desired goals independently of the learners or the situation, present language in a structured and linear fashion, then attempt to reinforce the content through non-contextualized practices. As a result, learners end up knowing about the language but not how to use it (as cited in
Abdullah, 1998). As an alternative to the PPP paradigm, task-based lesson is designed around authentic and meaningful real-world tasks, which learners are asked to complete collaboratively as they interact among each other making use of all available language resources they own. The approach is based on the fundamental assumption that, as Jeon (2006) noted, language learning is a developmental process promoting communication and social interaction rather than a product acquired by practicing language items, and that "learners learn the target language more effectively when they are naturally exposed to meaningful task-based activities."(p.193)

Task-based approach is recognized as an effective means of developing students' language output and interaction. More student-centered learning environment helps learners exercise greater flexibility in using language, develop linguistic fluency, and allows for meaningful communication. Authentic tasks carefully drawn from real-world situations will keep learners engaged and motivated more easily, which will result in better learning. As Harrington, Oliver and Reeves (2003) have pointed out, more contextualized exercises, as contrasted with academic and decontextualized vacuum, will create a learning environment which will have learners immersed in problem solving within realistic situations. The approach ultimately help teachers bridge the gap between language practically used in real world and unnatural language used within the world of school.

In spite of growing evidence of success, task-based instruction shows some limitations as well. One of the most significant and frequently voiced criticisms is that the method is not as effective or appropriate to lower level language learners with limited prior linguistic knowledge as it is to higher level students. Due to the significant amount of cognitive burden it poses on learners, beginning language learners who are asked to complete a challenging task in the target language often find the situation frustrating and, as a result, develop resistance to the learning method. When asked to use all the language they can muster to express themselves, beginning language learners who are unfamiliar with the learning context may not feel comfortable or productive as if they are thrown to a deep sea when they cannot swim (Willis, 1996). In task-based learning classrooms, frustration is not only with learners but with teachers as well. In his survey conducted among English as Second Language (ESL) teachers in East Asian countries, Littlewood (2007) found out that key obstacles to adopting task-based instructional approach in their classrooms were; 1) difficulties getting unmotivated students participate in tasks that usually require a higher level of motivation and enthusiasm from learners, and 2) inability to manage classroom as students get easily distracted and become noisy as they engage in group interaction to complete tasks collaboratively.

While these difficulties tend to arise more conspicuously in classrooms involving younger students, adult learners may benefit more from task-based instruction. In general, adult learners demonstrate distinctive characteristics that set them apart from younger learners, and some of these learning characteristics make task-based approach more plausible and appropriate for adult learners. Knowles (1990) developed adult learning theory of Andragogy based on the following assumptions: (1) Adults need to know why they need to learn something, (2) Adults need to learn experientially, (3) Adults are life-centered (or task- or problem-
centered) in their orientation to learning, (4) Adults become ready to learn when their life situation create a need to learn, (5) Adults have a self-concept of being responsible for their own decisions, and (6) Adults are motivated to learn by internal factors rather than external ones. According to these assumptions, adult learners are more motivated and more eager to learn than younger learners, have clearer goals and needs than younger learners who often might be learning a language only because it is required, and take control of their own learning. They are also oriented towards problem-solving learning and they learn best when knowledge is presented in real-life context. Obviously, constructivist task-based instructional approach and Andragogy share many aspects in common as they both emphasize ownership of the learning process by learners, experiential learning and a problem-solving approach to learning (Huang, 2002). Therefore, task-based approach can be seen as an ideal match for adult learners who in general are less likely to pose above mentioned concerns voiced by teachers.

As compared to traditional pedagogy, task-based instructional method demands increased competencies from teachers who will play a key role in making task-centered language learning successful. As a facilitator, teachers need to infuse the spirit of adventurism in the class to turn students into active learners who are willing to take a risk. It is also important that teachers allow learners time to make gradual adjustment to the unfamiliar learning method, provide necessary encouragement in the process, and build confidence (Curran, Deguent, Lund, Miletto, & Straeten, 2000). Effective teachers in the task-based learning environment should also be able to vary the level of tasks to accommodate the needs of beginner or lower level learners in their classrooms.

Effective language classroom instruction strategies require more than a simple understanding of the significance of communication skills. To help learners become active communicators, teachers should be able to employ instructional strategies that allow and support sufficient practicing of the language they have learned. Task-based instructional approach creates a learning environment where learners take control of their own learning and freely explore communicative skills focusing on tasks that are drawn from authentic real-world situations. Despite some limitations, task-based approach is still an attractive method in the field of language learning. The approach can be particularly useful in classrooms involving adult learners since their distinctive learning characteristics well match the constructivist elements of the task-based learning. With a wide variety of learning options such as distance learning readily available to today's adult learners, the number of classrooms involving adult learners has increased significantly in recent years. Although no single method fits all classrooms and learners in all contexts, task-based approach seems to be a highly viable option especially for adult language learners. Amidst more language classrooms moving away from traditional teacher-centered learning activities to student-centered learning environments, the responsibilities of instructors have become even greater in the instructional design process to devise adequate strategies to guide learners towards successful learning.
Some advantages of TBL

Although there are many apparent advantages, I will just highlight a few.

Students tend to be active and participate with great motivation towards tasks and activities in a TBL environment. It offers a platform for students to display their skills through their efforts and develops them further.

Language learners work and co-operate with each other in groups which builds bonds between them. When working in groups they are able to display and produce meaningful interaction on a given topic. Also the class work together and assess the whole outcome of the lesson.

Rather than concentrating on one aspect of a certain language feature, in all three stages of a TBL lesson students rely on previous language, knowledge and experience. This process enables the students to explore previous and new features of language.

Nunan (2004) states that TBL emphasises on learners to communicate through interaction in the target language, introduces authentic texts into the classroom, learners focus not only on language but the learning process itself and TBL makes the learners' own personal experiences important contributing factors to the classroom.

Some disadvantages of TBL

Again I will only mention a few disadvantages, although there are numerous critics that disapprove components of the TBL teaching method and framework. As with any model there will always arise negative elements within it that do not hold strong with its opponents.

Seedhouse (1999) implies that it could be argued that TBL emphasises too much on tasks and communicating meaning and this could have an impact on how to use the language with the correct form. In addition to this it is important to realise that there is a lot more to communication than performing tasks.

Skehan (1996) expressed that TBL could have some dangers if it is not executed correctly and could result in affecting the growth and change of the language learners' interlanguage. So from this view we can see that some sort of fossilization may occur within the students and cause barriers for the learners to progress. TBL is still not convincing, that it is a superior teaching method; it remains an opinion rather than reality and certainty Richards and Rodgers (2001).

Swan (2005: 376) says " TBI is frequently promoted as an effective teaching approach, superior to 'traditional' methods and soundly based in theory and research. The approach is often justified by the claim
that linguistic regularities are acquired through 'noticing' during communicative activity, and therefore be addressed primarily by incidental 'focus on form' during task performance. However, this claim is based on unproved hypotheses, and there is no compelling empirical evidence for the validity of the model”.

In this particular section of the paper I have touched on some key words such as 'interlanguage', 'fossilization' and 'noticing'. These key terms will be expanded upon later and what impact they have, how they relate to learners of language and how they are perceived when associated with TBL.

**What is a task?**

What is actually meant by the word "task" in TBL and how do we really understand this key important word? In various materials the word "task" has been described as role plays, grammar exercises and other activities. However in relation to TBL the word "task" takes on a different meaning and understanding from the mainstream definition. Willis (1996: 23) states that tasks are "activities where the target language is used by the learner for the communicative purpose (goal) in order to achieve an outcome". Stern (1992: 195) defines a task as "realistic language use.....focuses on a learners' attention on a task, problem, activity, and topic and not on a particular language point". Foster and Skehan (1996: 300) explain tasks as "activities that are meaning-focused and outcome-evaluated and have some real world relationship". Nunan (1989) clarifies that a task is "A piece of work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing, or interacting in the target language while their attention is principally focused on meaning rather than form". Evidently there are many varieties and opinions of what a task actually is, but overall, what is apparent is the fact that a task is an important component towards the establishment of learning a language especially related to TBL.

Overall there are numerous theories regarding second language acquisition (SLA) and TBL represents a framework that enables students to be busy with aids and materials in order to achieve some kind of task or goal. TBL helps, improves and nurtures the learners' second language by interacting with tasks and then to use the target language to complete the tasks. This framework also involves the learners much more productively and makes them depend on prior world knowledge. As the learners share knowledge with each other, they will have to rely on their existing knowledge and language skills to solve the tasks. This process will also exhibit new language and give language learners a variety of approaches to improve their overall language skills. Generally, TBL can establish ideal conditions for effective language learning to take place.

**Types of tasks**

The types of task that a language learner can take part in are numerous and differ from each other in terms of what each task requires the learner to do. Willis (1996) states that there are six types of task that learners can engage in which promotes successful language learning.

The first task type is listing which involves brainstorming and fact finding. These activities could help to complete some kind of list or draft a mind map.
The second task type is ordering and sorting meaning that the learners will be sequencing, categorising, ranking and classifying. All these activities could help to sort and order information according to specified criteria.

The third task type is comparing meaning that learners have to search for similarities, differences and match information accordingly. The outcome of such tasks could be items appropriately matched or assembled, or the identification of similarities and differences.

The fourth task type is problem solving which could involve analysing real situations, analysing hypothetical scenarios, reasoning and decision making. The result from such activities could give solutions to such problems which could then be evaluated.

The fifth task type is sharing personal experiences meaning that the learners narrate, explore, describe and explain attitudes, reactions and opinions. Social and cultural differences are made apparent through this activity also it builds a bond between the learners due to their insight into the different cultures and experiences.

The sixth and last task type is creative tasks and includes such activities as fact finding, brainstorming, comparing, sorting, ordering and problem solving.

Furthermore what is evident is that TBL makes the learner focus on meaning rather than form. Students take part in communicative tasks which help them work on a grammar feature. The learners work on their own expressing themselves in their writing and speaking skills. Willis (1996: 101) states "tasks and texts combine to give students a rich exposure to language and also opportunities to use it themselves".

In order for students to really appreciate and benefit from such tasks, it is very important that the teacher chooses material that will develop and challenge the different types of students. Willis (1996: 23) says the teacher should prepare tasks with "a suitable degree of intellectual and linguistic challenge and promote learners' language development as efficiently as possible".

So what is apparent from above is that tasks, related to TBL, are shown to be significant and control a large part of the lesson. It is at this stage that the students are able to work in a group or individually in order to practice the target language using the various activities. Tasks are central for the learners of language, and it is believed that if the students focus on the task rather than the language then they may learn more effectively. Additionally all tasks, in essence, have the same characteristics meaning that they open up parts of language that need to be utilised.

Conclusion

Willis' conditions are crucial for successful language learning to take place, not only in TBL, but in all learning arenas. In any classroom, exposure, use, motivation and instruction are vital ingredients and play a major part towards second language acquisition. Through TBL, students are able to extract the target
language from tasks and concentrate on meaning, so that this method prepares them for interaction with the outside world. The tasks have to arouse motivation in students and this can only be achieved if tasks and learners have a connection. Exposure to a wide variety of authentic sources and activities are valuable for stimulating their minds. Students must be able to use the tasks to their advantage to achieve some sort of self satisfaction.

The condition of instruction is important and, depending on various elements, the way it is applied varies. In my teaching arena the practice of instruction, whether explicit or implicit, is always in demand because of the needs of the students. Of course the day to day use of instruction differs according to the type of lesson I am teaching. However I would say giving instructions, to my students, is essential and not desirable.